

Rideau Park United Church. Ottawa
November 24, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: 1 Samuel 8:4-20
Luke 23:33-43

Sermon: Christ the Servant King (Reign of Christ)

A story borrowed from Aesop's fables :

So the frogs wanted a leader. There were just too many disputes in the swamp. Who was sitting on whose lily pad – whether tad poles could attend the evening choir rehearsal – if the frogs with the longest tongues should have the best fly catching spot, while the little ones went hungry. They pestered Mother Nature with their requests until eventually she tossed a log into the pond and told them that the log was their new leader.

For a while the frogs were quite pleased. The log provided them with a nice place to sun themselves on a warm afternoon, or to watch a sunset together in the evening. They had a place where frogs could gather, whole families even, and a place where they could talk their problems out. Mother Nature was pleased, the log leader seemed to be working out just fine.

Soon, however, the frogs began to wonder about the log. Was it really a leader? After all, they basically ran all over it and it never stopped them from doing what they wanted. The log offered no resistance, it didn't tell them what to do. Over time, the frogs decided that this style of leadership really didn't fit their expectations. They were important – and their leader should reflect their importance. They needed – no, they deserved – some strong and charismatic leadership.

So back they went to Mother Nature, complaining long and loud. The log leader was too laid back. Weak and without direction. They wanted a stronger administration, better oversight, they wanted a leader that other species would respect.

Finally Mother Nature gave in to them. This time she gave them a stork to be their leader. How impressive! the frogs thought. The stork was proud and fast, standing tall above the pond – she could see everything that was coming. All the frogs had to look up to her. Every time they saw her stalking around the pond, the frogs were awed by her presence. She made a great deal of noise and attracted lots of attention. And when she opened her wings to fly – well, it was a sight to be seen.

But then frogs started to disappear. And the stork got a lot fatter. Ultimately the frogs joy turned to sorrow and then to panic. Eventually the whole frog community was decimated, the final remnant hiding out under the old log, afraid to show themselves.

Did the frogs get the leader they needed? Or did they get the leader they deserved?

There's a reason I don't tell those stories during an election campaign. Actually, Aesop is more particular in his fable, the frogs wanted a KING. There's a very familiar bible

story, from the time when Israel didn't have a King, only a the prophet Samuel, who led the people because he could hear God's voice.

Unfortunately, for Samuel, the leaders of the tribes came demanding a king. "We want to be like all the other nations", they declared, "someone strong and mighty, to lead us into battles." And God said "Well, they don't listen to me anyways. Let them have their kings."

But sometimes the leaders who have the appearance of being everything we want, are not the leaders we really need. Kings didn't work out well for Israel. That re-worked fable from Aesop and the Bible both demonstrate the ongoing dilemma: There is the mighty leader whose appearance and actions are very impressive, but whose hunger for power eats up the strength of the community. Then there is the servant leader whose patience and whose appearance might dismay the people in the beginning, but whose presence and wisdom builds up the community instead.

The first fits well our stereotype of what "real leadership" looks like. The second one doesn't fit with what everyone expects but, according to the gospels, that is the model which we find in the life of Jesus.

Today is reign of Christ Sunday – a day we take the time to think about the power of Christ at work in the world. We celebrate Christ's model of leadership. But that leadership and power does not look the way we expect power and leadership to appear in the world.

What image does the gospel serve up for us?

Jesus dying on the cross. The words "King of the Jews" were inscribed above his head. A scandalous, unimaginable, shocking image of a king, a leader, who has been scorned by the world.

And God said "Well, they don't listen to me anyways. Let them have their kings."

It seems like many Christians have tried really hard to turn Jesus Christ into THAT kind of leader. The post-resurrection Jesus, who dons a crown and a clean new robe – who goes from brown skin to white skin – and servant to soldier – who floats above humanity, instead of carrying a real cross down one of our streets.

For a long time, the steeples on Christian cathedrals were the tallest thing in our cities – because the builders wanted to proclaim that God in Christ is above and beyond every other thing. Now those cathedrals are overshadowed by enormous bank towers, and the homeless sleep in the church doorways. Sometimes they are invited in for a warm meal. Maybe that is a better image for Christians and for Christ at work. Christian love requires us to use all that we are and all that we have to lift up the downtrodden and represent love in the world – even our cathedrals and our church kitchens.

The power of faith is not the same as other kinds of power that encounter in the world. Those are external sources of power – whether it be through wealth or politics, through social status or celebrity. They are sources of power that can be exercised over another person or group. They are also sources of power that can be lost.

In the power of faith, however, God is at work within us, a power we choose. It sends us on a journey seeking other images of hope, and new visions of leadership. It calls us not just to go to church, but to be the church. The journey takes us inward, tapping into our own spiritual wisdom, even while it propels us out into the world. It doesn't depend on the height of your steeples or the size of your investment account. It's the power of the Spirit.

If we listen to the gospel reading today, we find ourselves on Calvary's hill, immersed in a drama that we usually only experience on Good Friday. In it Jesus not only suffers the pain of the cross, but also the scorn of the people around him. "King of the Jews?" they read. "But you are hanging there like a common criminal. How can you be the Messiah??"

We criticize the crowd for putting Jesus down, but I'm not sure we have any better understanding of how God's power works. When something bad happens, we also cry out "why me, God? Why don't you save me? Have you abandoned me, one who is faithful?"

Why didn't Jesus save himself? When we talk about the reign of Christ, or the kingdom of God, how do we understand things in the world that seem to be beyond God's control?

Jesus said "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." When the second criminal heard Jesus speak forgiveness for the very ones who had crucified and tormented him, he could see where true power lay. Not by turning life into death, but by making those who are dying I hope anew.

The response of the second thief in the Good Friday story inspires us to keep the faith, even without understanding. The criminal had no reason to expect grace. He had broken the law and deserved his punishment. And yet, in opposition to his own friend, he argued for Jesus' dignity and worth. "You and I are right to fear God", he told his co-conspirator. "But this man Jesus has done nothing wrong."

The criminal didn't ask Jesus to take him down from the cross. He asked to be remembered. For him - to be remembered by a good man - that was his salvation. It would be on God's terms, not according to the expectations of the world around him. Jesus didn't fit the expectations of the Messiah or the King in his time. A true Messiah would have found the way out of a crucifixion, the scoffers said. A true King would not have ended up on a cross.

But the cross was not the end of the story. The power of the cross reveals something to us that is truly powerful and truly holy. That blessing and equity, forgiveness and God's presence are the true paradise. When we love justice, compassion and peace, then Christ's reign is truly known. We **will** see everyone as children of God, and we will clear a path to welcome everyone to that banquet of God's grace.

And God will be revealed not by warriors but by those who serve with humble hearts and holy power. Thanks be to God, Amen.