

**Sermon: 2019/11/24 (Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - *Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 4 or 16; Colossians 1:11-20; & Luke 23:33-43\_BTR***

[Invite children to the front. Yoyo]

Have you tried to play ping-pong?

Well, what about 'Tiny Pong'?

It's a new game from Hasbro.

(I saw it advertised on the Cartoon Network.)

The aim is to bounce the ball from one side to the other with one hand as many times as you can.

(It takes a lot of practice.)

I'm not very good at it, as you can tell.

But you get the idea:

back and forth, back and forth, again and again and again.

It's repetitive.

You might say, "monotonous."

And you might feel that way too about how we've gone back and forth between many of the prophets in recent weeks, all of them going on and on about the Babylonian Exile and the destruction of Israel.

Again and again we've heard the same voices from the Scriptures: we began with Isaiah, then there was Jeremiah, Joel, Habakkuk, Haggai, Isaiah again, more Jeremiah and then back to Isaiah.

*Phew!*

So, why?

Why would the Bible - why would the Church - spend so much time focused on talking about this *one* event?

The Exile?

Because it is so significant; because of how it prepares us for the magnitude of what Christmas represents:

When the Babylonians finally destroyed the Kingdom that Saul, David and Solomon had built, Abraham's dream of a "Promised Land" seemed to die for good:

Yes, some Jews made it back from Babylon - and they still live now where the "Promised Land" was.

But it's *never* been the same.

*Most* Jewish people still live in foreign countries as if still in *perpetual* captivity; also, they fear that God has been *passive* since the Exile happened.

He speaks to them through the pages of the Old Testament, of course, but they believe He has (largely) withdrawn Himself from the world.

*But we know different, don't we!*

We know that God has answered the Exile: by sending His eternal son, Jesus.

Let's pray:  
Lord God, ...

[Dismiss children.]

Why would we be hearing about Jesus' death - His crucifixion - in *late* November?  
It's like Easter all over again, isn't it?  
Deja vu.  
And so close to Christmas too; to the occasion when we mark His *birth!*  
Doesn't that "strike" you as odd?

Well, *firstly*, it confirms what I was saying (about) two weeks ago:  
that the focus of Fall, as a season, seems to be death.  
Here, in our (Bible) readings, is another example.  
The most important of *all* deaths.  
Christ's death.

But, *secondly*, although the Church's calendar of feast-days can be a bit mysterious sometimes - after all, we should expect it to be that way - it reflects two thousand years of trial and error; two thousand years of accumulated wisdom *and* dumb mistakes - the reason for dwelling *once again* on the meaning of the Savior's grisly *yet glorious(!)* execution just before our preparations for that "most wonderful time of the year" get into full "swing," is that that execution is the *proper* context for comprehending the *proper* meaning of the festivities (we're about to enjoy).  
Christ's crucifixion is the *cause* of Christmas, even though, *chronologically speaking*, I appear to have those two events back-to-front:

Consider this: putting aside what you *may* believe, putting aside orthodox religion, ask yourself, as objectively as you can:  
"What is there to get *truly* excited about in regard to the birth of some baby Jewish boy to poor parents in Palestine?"  
*Lots* of children are born in circumstances similar to His, and we don't throw parties and decorate our houses.  
Indeed, *normally*, we bemoan and fret over children born in such situations:  
homeless, living essentially outdoors;  
then, days later, *stateless* too - a refugee in a foreign country.  
Also, His mother, "Mary," was, we would say now, underage; she was a *teen*-mom - someone without a high school diploma; not likely to go to college.  
*And* her country was "groaning" under (oppressive) military occupation by a superpower- like Crimea today by the Russians.  
These seeming *external* realities are reasons to call "Child Services," to write to our congresspeople to complain; or to sign cheques for NGOs like the Red Cross or Salvation Army.  
These seeming *external* realities are reasons *not* to sing songs, deck halls, ring bells,

take sleigh rides, and dance and drink champagne...

So, to return to our question:

What makes *Jesus'* birth different?

And worth celebrating lavishly by the next four weeks of carefully laid plans?

And the answer is that what makes *Jesus'* birth worth celebrating in such a way is who we *later* come to see that that baby was beneath His modest human form - that is, the *divine* Creator; and then, *as such*, what He went on to do, principally, *on the Cross*.

On the Cross where we find Him hanging today, certainly in dreadful torment, in our reading from *Luke 23*.

And what was He doing up there?

Dying for our sins, right?

*But to what end?*

So that we may gain access to something that, otherwise, was closed off to us:

That thing, as Jesus describes it to the "criminal" dying slowly near Him, is

'Paradise.'[\[Lk. 23:43\]](#)

And notice that capitalization.

The word is a *proper* noun like "Ben Randall" or "St. Matthew's Episcopal Church."

It isn't, then, just some adjective.

Which means Jesus isn't saying the criminal will find himself in a place that will *appear* to be paradisiacal in contrast to his current condition, but rather it will *be* paradise itself.

The *definitive* paradise.

Paradise without qualification or caveat or equal.

And what makes it this way - it's *fundamental*, defining feature - the feature which both sets it apart from and above all other, inferior, lower-case "p" paradises - is identified in the previous sentence by the same criminal, which is that it is the *Lord's* kingdom.

He is, in other words, in charge - "in charge" in the most thoroughly true and accurate sense of that term.

He will no longer *share* a role in human lives with those other influences and personalities we permit to confuse and beguile us.

His won't be one still voice of calm among a host of others.

Competing with ego and appetite and Apple.

He will be, to use an old fashioned word, *the suzerain*.

The "suzerain" is the person at the very top of the hierarchy, who's power and authority are unquestioned and without limit.

Like an emperor or a caliph.

They are the person who *never* needs pay back a favor *or* explain Himself.

And yet who's privilege is to be able demand those things from others without any need to justify their actions.

Now, if anyone else was the suzerain, this would be terrifying.

Power corrupts.

Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But that's because we - what we are - can't be trusted to genuinely put others' interests first.

And to fully forsake our own.

We manage it only by help of the Holy Spirit for the most fleeting moments.

Even our purest attempts to "do good" are, observes the theologian John Calvin, an 'alloy'.

Notice, however, in contrast to us, the way Jesus responds to the *monstrous* injustice He suffers:

"Forgive them," He says.

(And He says it - in the first instance - to people who not only were unfairly killing Him, *and* show no remorse, but *mock* His pain![\[Lk. 23:36\]](#) How sinister and "twisted" is that!?)

And His offer - of forgiveness - is still available.

For the big "stuff" and the small.

To you and to me.

It's ready even before we ask for it.

So take it.

Accept it.

And invite others to do the same.

Let's take a moment to reflect.