

Christ the King Sunday, Old Testament, Year C

THE RIGHTEOUS SHEPHERD-KING

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Christ the King Sunday

Analysis by Michael Hoy

1Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. 2Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and you have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. 3 Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. 5 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

DIAGNOSIS: Shepherd-Rule That Does Not Serve Righteousness

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Failing Shepherd-Kings

Jeremiah could see what was happening to the people of Israel under the rule of the kings. These kings, who were to be like shepherds to their flock, occupied their thrones but not their vocation. Their peoples were subjected to "evil doings"—being

“scattered,” “driven away.” and “not attended” to (v. 2). Surely in any time this is a warning cry to all who aspire to take the throne, or already hold one. But it also applies to the ways for us all in all of life where righteousness does not prevail. Instead there is the disparaging of the poor and the oppressed, and the abuse and mistreatment of others. And that is, regrettably, happening in great abundance.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Every Sheep for Him/Herself

More to the heart of the matter is that the sheep themselves find themselves not only mistreated, but forgotten—out of heart and out of mind. To be sure, this unholy rule that “destroys” and “scatters” (v. 1) binds the ruler into a myopic vision that cannot see beyond his/her own throne and power; but such myopic vision is contagious. It places others (including ourselves) looking out for power or ways to protect ourselves at the expense of others, even letting others live in “fear,” despair, and go “missing” (v. 4). All of this undermines God’s intent for wholeness and shalom. Instead of shalom, we have open, heartfelt hostility, avoidance, isolation, and disparaging of others to the point that we are part and parcel of the very process of destroying and scattering.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God’s Attending to Evil

To which there is the opening word of God: “Woe!” (v. 1)—because none are attending to others does not translate into a sense that God will not attend to us. God will attend alright (v. 2). But that kind of attending, that kind of justice, is one that we cannot bear. It will mean our exile into death.

PROGNOSIS: The Rule of the Righteous-Shepherd

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God’s

Attendant-Shepherd-King

Which is why we need another Shepherd-King. How often we long for just the right king, but long in such a way that misses the mark of the King who has already come for us. “The LORD is our righteousness,” declares the prophet. Behold the Shepherd-King who places himself in the very breach of our beings, in all our deep lostness before God and one another! There is the cruciformed King that matches this description. His vision is focused on all the failures of this world—sheep and kings alike—with the goal of saving them, “gathering” the remnant so that they may be fruitful and multiply (v. 3).

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Placing our Trust in this King

Placing our trust in this Shepherd-King replaces our need for self-preservation. With our eyes focused on this Shepherd-King, no matter what befalls us, we are not forgotten, misplaced, left to rot in the depths of despair among the missing of this world. Instead, we become so deeply re-membered by this Shepherd that we are kings and queens arising, valued with such integrity that there is no power or prestige or promise that can even come close to the very treasure that is our own through faith in this Shepherd-King.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Remembering the Sheep

And because this is so, our own vision turns away from looking out for our own sheepskin to becoming partners with the shepherd, seeking out the many sheep of our world longing for safety and salvation (vv. 4-5). Wherever there is evil, we seek good. Wherever there is scattering and distancing, we seek community. Wherever there is one left unattended, or worse left only with the attendance of destruction and wrath, we reach out with the grasp of hands-themselves-crucified-and-raised so none will be without a place in this righteous Branch that has been

planted in our world (vv. 5-6). All with the joyous proclamation, "The LORD is our righteousness!"