

Sermon – Proper 14 – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma

Romans 10: 5-15

The news this past week has been full of the rising tensions with North Korea over it's continued efforts to develop a long-range ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. The escalating tension has mostly come from an increase in the threatening rhetoric of both the leader of North Korea Kim Jung-un and our president. President Trump said in part that if North Korea does not stop threatening the United States and her allies then "fire and fury like they have never seen" would be brought to bear upon them.

I found myself wondering about the nature of these threats and whether I should really be worried. It definitely unsettled me and maybe it unsettled you too. I wondered also about people's responses historically to other times of rising tension. Some of you would have remembered what it was like during the Cuban missile crisis or the lead up to the Vietnam and Korean wars. The increase in tension awakens us to the fragility of the world and our vulnerability even though we might be thousands of miles away from the epicenter. We are though always reliant on the President, as Commander in Chief, and his advisors to promote peace and to steer us away from conflict.

When someone threatens us it might seem quite normal to look toward a strong leader or a stronger person, a person with more power than us, to stand up for us and to rescue or protect us. We might look for a savior of sorts in these leaders. If we do the language used by the President this week might seem quite appropriate and reassuring. If we don't then the President's rhetoric might be quite frightening.

At least since the Second World War the North Korean people have been conditioned to believe that the United States was their enemy and was ready to wage war against them and wipe them out. Three generations of the Kim family have lead North Korea since the 1950s and all have had the same ethos. Each one of these leaders has been revered by the people, has continued to build the largest standing army in the world, has suppressed its people mercilessly, has eliminated anyone that was deemed a threat and has continued to develop ways of protecting the regime through military hardware and technological capability. The leadership has always sought ways to demonstrate that only they can protect and save the people from the imperial enemies, only they are saviors.

In most western countries I think we like to see ourselves as enlightened nations formed largely by Christians. As a modern democratic society, with religious tolerance and ethnically diverse populations, we still risk falling in behind a person who we might perceive as a savior for us. We need to be continually vigilant about where we put our trust.

As Christians we should put our trust in God first should we not. It is God, through Jesus Christ that offers us salvation. Through our faith, believed in our hearts and confessed with our lips, we are saved. Paul tells us in his epistle to his friends in Rome "no one who believes in him will be put to shame," that there is one Lord who is Lord of all and is

generous to all who call on God. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” Paul says. What greater message of reassurance could we possibly asked for?

God has offered salvation since the fall of Adam and Eve. The doctrine of salvation that guides the church has been developed over the last two millennia. This doctrine deals with the restoration of the created order, and above all humanity, to its proper relationship with God. The church as the body of Christ is critical here because it is the purpose of the church is to restore all people to God through Jesus Christ. You will find this stated in the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer. If we are looking for a mission statement for our church then we need look no further than this statement. Our whole focus should be on working towards restoring others and ourselves to God, through Jesus Christ.

Our distinctive approach to salvation as Christians is found in that statement. That is that salvation is grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the shape of salvation is formed by Christ (McGrath p319).

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were something the world had never seen and has not seen since. This unique event opened up a new way to restoration through redemption. Redemption has given us a new understanding of an age-old truth that is only revealed to us in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Christ came into the world to reveal the saving nature of God, not to establish that saving will in the first place.

The shape of salvation through Christ comes as we try and live our lives ever more closely imitating Jesus’ relationships with people and his teachings. Through this we are brought into conformity with Christ as “the outward aspects of a believer’s life are brought into line with the inward relationship to Christ, established through faith.” (McGrath p318)

Reams of paper and thousands of hours of prayer and study have been devoted to exploring the church’s doctrine of salvation. We could develop our understanding by all taking theology degrees or we could be satisfied with the explanation Paul gives to his friends in Rome. In Paul’s epistle this morning we heard that salvation is claimed through our faith held deeply in our hearts and confessed through our lips, as we speak to our belief that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

In my reflection this week on the escalating tension with North Korea I also reflected on the people that live there under this oppressive regime. Most of these people live in darkness, having never heard of the saving power of Jesus. They are conceived, born, live and die in a world that is shaped by a communist dictator and his enablers. Most of the population sees Kim Jung-un as their savior.

There is though a slither of light of God’s presence in North Korea. Missionaries in the late 19th century developed many of the hospitals, schools and other social infrastructure common in that part of the world. After WWII many of the Christians fled to the south leaving only a handful in the communist north. To this day there are a handful of churches that continue to exist in the north. We have no real idea about what they are

allowed to teach or how they are allowed to worship but we can have some hope that God is working in the hearts of this small minority group and from them others may be reached. However when you live never hearing of the good news how can you be saved?

There are two main schools of thought about this issue. The first is that God wishes for all people to be saved. The second is that salvation is only possible in and through Jesus Christ.

The first concept is known as Universalism. The essence of Universalism is that in the end grace and love will triumph over death and separation from God. God has elected to be a friend and partner of humanity and through sending Jesus Christ to us has accepted the pain and cost of redemption. God will bear rejection, condemnation and death that are the inevitable consequences of sin. Theologian Karl Barth says “any notion of predestination to condemnation is eliminated. The only one who is predestined to condemnation is Jesus Christ who for all eternity willed to suffer for us.” (McGath p370)

The second school of thought is that only believers in God will be saved. Augustine was one of the first theologians to really tackle this aspect of salvation and cited numerous scriptural quotations to support his thesis. An example is from John 6:51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus said. If anyone eats of this bread they will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, argued that there needs to be faith in God in order to be saved but affirmed that this faith need not be explicitly Christian. CW Lewis took a similar view saying “there are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who therefore belong to Christ without knowing it.”

For us here today we have a sure and certain hope of salvation. It is up to us to ensure this hope is radiated out to the community so we can offer them too the certain hope of salvation.

I can only hope for the North Korean people, raised in darkness trusting in a false savior, that they will be led by “God’s secret influence” and commit themselves to the pursuit of goodness and truth, even though they may have no formal knowledge of Jesus Christ. (McGrath p346)

Our role as Christians is to do what we can to introduce the lost to God through the good news of Jesus Christ so that their restoration might be assured. We don’t have to convert people, as this is the work of the Holy Spirit. What we can and must do is to introduce people to God through our welcome, our worship, our pastoral care, our outreach and our lived example.

“How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.” We need to preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings that

are made possible through our faith in God. How beautiful indeed are the feet of those that work for peace.

There is a huge need in this world for our work. We prayerfully need to seek God's guidance for ourselves and for the church. At this time of escalating rhetoric around possible conflict with North Korea, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ and through peace is needed more than ever.

How beautiful are your feet today?

Amen