“Jesus Christ Liberator”
Third Sunday In Ordinary Time 2017

Reflection By: Deacon Paul Hursh

Today’s scripture from Matthew’s Gospel (which echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah from our first reading) introduces Jesus as a Liberator and, I should add, a friend of outcasts. Matthew also gives us a strong sense of how different Jesus’ approach to teaching was, as compared to the Jewish rabbinical tradition. A tradition where a rabbi would focus on his kindred Jews and would-be disciples would pursue the teacher, not the other way around. Instead of associating with the temple officials & priests, fellow rabbis, scribes, & scholars of the Law, Jesus sought out and associated with the outcast; Tax collectors, foreigners, prostitutes, and drunkards – in short “sinners.”

Jesus comes to call the lost children, to heal them, to forgive them, and to express his Father’s love for them. He didn’t ignore their sins, but lovingly called them to repentance and gave them a second chance. He offered them a chance to change their lives and to have a seat at the table, a seat at the banquet table of the Kingdom of God. Not some future heaven, but a place of justice and love in the here and now. As Jesus preached, the Kingdom of God is at Hand! (Luke 10:9, 10:11, 17:21 Matthew 3:2, 10:7)

Interestingly, he did not have much time for the self-righteous, judgmental, and insular elite. These were aforementioned temple officials & priests, rabbis, scribes, & scholars of the Law. It
is not surprising that these ‘establishment folks’ had nothing but contempt and hatred for Jesus who seemed to be unsettling their comfortable and secure system. This is the system that kept the elite in power at the expense of the poor. Also not surprising, was the love that the ‘bottom dwellers’ had for Jesus. Jesus treated them with respect, and showed them care and concern for their plight and worked to make life in the present world better for them.

It would seem of little consolation to offer the suffering masses a promise of a future heaven in lieu of compassion, concern, and healing in the present. When they came to him he forgave and healed all who came to him. This is not to say that there is no consolation in knowing of a future heaven with God, there is. …but if God is present in the now and the kingdom of God is at hand (as Jesus preached), then God will not withhold this healing in the present. This salvation is in the person of ‘Jesus the Liberator,” who relieves suffering and offers forgiveness.

Given the scriptural mandate to proclaim that the kingdom of God is now, I posit that salvation has as much to do with this world, as it has to do with this world redeemed. Rather than a reward based moral judgment, salvation is the acceptance of this mandate and acceptance of ones true self as a beloved child and faithful servant of God. Jesus is the mediator of salvation through his example of building the kingdom by selfless and loving service to others. His service consists of healing, forgiving, empowering and liberating anyone in need. The personal relevance of this and the relevance of this view of salvation in ministry is that Jesus saves us through and in us. Jesus is the liberator because he empowers us with the image of the “beloved son” (Matthew 3:17) to choose to be part of redeemed creation rather than miss what is already present in the here and now. Our baptismal call is to emulate this beloved image, and to do so beyond all boundaries, religious, political, and national, just as Jesus did.