

Proper 29, Year C

November 20, 2016

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Colossians 1:13

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son...

As the Church measures time (which is different, as usual, from the way the world does things), **today** is the last Sunday of the year. And on the last Lord's Day of every year, we proclaim Christ as King.

Jesus Christ is "King". We hear that ascription often enough; *quite* often, in fact, as Christmas approaches; for in our Christmas carols we sing, "This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing"; "'Hark,' the herald angels sing: 'Glory to the newborn king.'"

But do we know what we are saying? What does it *mean* to call Jesus "king"?

"King" is a difficult concept for us Americans, for we have no experience living under the rule of a king; in fact, our country was *founded* by *rebell*ing **against** a king. And yet it never fails that our emotions rise when we sing Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, "King of kings! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"; or, as we sing in our final hymn today, "Crown Him with many crowns!" Why do we get such an adrenaline rush when we sing of Christ as our King?

I asked my inner self that question, and I am admittedly a bit ashamed to discover that one of the sources of adrenaline which I recognize inside myself whenever I sing, "Crown him with many crowns" is an allure, enticement, and temptation

within me toward *triumphalism*. Triumphalism – which Wikipedia defines as “the attitude or belief that a particular doctrine, religion, culture, or social system is superior to and should triumph over all others.” **My** country is better than any other nation; my political party and candidate is better than any other; **my** religion is the only true one, and Jesus Christ is **king!**

And yet, tellingly, on this Christ the King Sunday we do *not* read of Jesus’ *triumphal* entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Instead, we read of Jesus nailed naked to a cross. The leaders of the people are scoffing at him; the soldiers deride him, saying, “*If* you are the **King** of the Jews, save yourself!” The sign above Jesus’ head mockingly proclaims: “**This** is the King of the Jews.”

Now, let’s be honest: Is this the kind of person we would vote for as President? A beaten, bleeding, dying man, hanging naked in public for all to see? No; we do *not* elect people who are crucified, naked and vulnerable to be President. Perhaps if Jesus **WOULD** miraculously come down from the cross, as he is being challenged to do, and smite all of his accusers and overthrow the reigning Roman Emperor – *yes*, we would vote for him, crown him on the spot! But he does not do that. Instead, he prays that God forgive those who crucified him, and then he dies.

Was there *anyone* at Jesus’ crucifixion who, seeing Jesus beaten, whipped, and hanging naked on a cross, believed him to be a king?

Yes, there *was* **one** person – and if we had not already read the book or seen the movie, the *identity* of that person would shock the socks off us. For the one person who understands Jesus’ kingship is not a person in a position of power, nor a *disciple* of Jesus; it is a common criminal, convicted and sentenced to a horrifying, humiliating death on a cross which happens to be planted right next to that of Jesus. “Jesus,” he begs, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.” His *kingdom*? **What** kingdom?

What insight does this criminal have, to see what no one else can see – that this crucified man, in his very suffering and dying, reigns over a kingdom? I have to believe that it has something to do with what Jesus prayed for those who crucified him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

The crucified criminal must have thought to himself, “What a strange strength this is! What an unheard-of sense of mercy! I know **I** am *deserving* of this death, and could never expect forgiveness for the awful things I have done, and yet if this extraordinary man is able to pray God’s forgiveness upon those who have *un*justly flogged him and crucified him, do you suppose – is it at all possible – is there is a *chance* God would forgive **me**, also? Jesus, remember me when you come into *your* kingdom – this strange kingdom of forgiveness.”

Jesus reigns, not from a throne, but from a cross. Fr. Thomas Keating writes, “The reign of Christ the King is not a reign of power but of compassion. [And] he invites us to participate.”¹

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My friends, when we elect a new president, there is an orderly transfer of power. One leader leaves, and different leader takes his place. The **nation** does not change; just the president. This was what the Jews were *expecting* in a Messiah: that a new Jewish leader like King David would supplant and replace the Roman Emperor and take over. But, as Professor David Lose points out, saying Christ is our king means something totally different than a regime change. Dr. Lose writes: “If proclaiming... ‘Christ is Lord,’ the earliest Christian confession – meant simply giving our allegiance to a different ruler, then most of our lives could remain untouched. As long as we didn't swear allegiance to some Caesar or [earthly] king... we could more or less conduct business as usual and conceive of faith as a largely private affair. But the kingdom... of God that Jesus proclaims represents a *whole new reality* where **nothing** is the same -- not our relationships or rules, not our view of self or others, not our priorities or principles -- *nothing*. Everything we thought we knew about kings and kingdoms, in fact, gets turned right on its head.”²

In other words, proclaiming that Christ is our king doesn't mean we give Jesus a higher ranking of authority in our lives than earthly rulers; it means that we have become citizens of a *totally different kingdom*, the Kingdom of God, where Jesus reigns and *compassion* rules rather than power. “**Thy** kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven,” we pray, and it is that **heavenly** kingdom come on earth that the crucified thief catches a glimpse of in Jesus' forgiveness of his executioners. And he asks Jesus to remember him in his kingdom of compassion; for if Jesus could forgive his executioners, could not he – and God! – forgive the thief, also?

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “You know that the rulers in **this** world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be *different*. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant...” (20:25-27) This is indeed a very different understanding of kingship, and a very different kingdom based on a very different set of values. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world.” (18:36) Only those who glimpsed his not-from-**this**-world kingdom, like the crucified thief did, could see that Jesus **was** a king. To pray, “**thy** kingdom come” means that **my** kingdom must go, and I must enter into a new realm where love, compassion, and forgiveness reign over all peoples on the face of the earth. And I must live in the midst of *that* kingdom, even while I live in this world.

So, my friends, as we sing “Crown him with many crowns,” let us do so aware that it is a hymn not of triumphalism but of profound irony. For the hymn says that the one we are crowning is the lamb who, according to the Book of

Revelation, looks like it has been killed. (Rev. 5:6) What we are doing when we proclaim Christ as king is not simply inviting Jesus onto the throne of our lives; rather, we are entering into a different kingdom entirely, being “transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son,” as our Epistle puts it (Col. 1:13): a kingdom ruled not by power, but by compassion, forgiveness, and love.

May **that** kingdom come on earth, as in heaven; and may each of us work and pray to make that a reality.

AMEN

¹ Thomas Keating, author, S. Stephanie Iachetta, editor, *The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 323

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=1559>