

## Christ the King

Proper 29, Year C – Luke 23:33-43

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, November 24, 2013*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Today we come to the end of the liturgical year. Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost and next week is the First Sunday of Advent. Next week we start over. Of course, the liturgical year is more of a loop than a straight line. Our Church School children know this well – they are reminded every week with the giant liturgical calendar that adorns the wall of their Godly Play space, a calendar that is round with the weeks laid out like pie pieces around the edge. Like time itself – and space, for that matter, I am told – the Church Year curves ‘round on itself until the end and the beginning meet, so that when we begin the year with Advent, we actually begin with the end.

Ending the Church Year this week with “Christ the King” Sunday, we plant one foot in the first advent, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, and the other in the last advent, the coming of Christ at the end of time. We take the time to celebrate the Sovereignty that gathers every speck of history in between.

Curiously, I have always thought, our Gospel lesson this morning, this “Christ the King” Sunday, sends us back to a place called the Skull. It sends us to an hour when the most monstrous evil and the most marvelous good curve ‘round and converge upon a wooden cross. For us this one moment is the turning point of time, the midpoint of history, the still, turning focus of human salvation.

Since the announced theme of the Lectionary this morning is the kingship of Christ, we expect the text to show us signs of Christ’s sovereignty – but they’re seemingly hard to come by. A king, after all, wields power. The Jesus of this morning’s Gospel lesson, cruel nails pinning him to the hard wood of the cross, is powerless – powerless even to move. In order to be a king, a king has a domain, some land or region or territory over which he reigns. The Jesus we meet this morning, suspended in mid-air, cannot even touch the ground above which he is dying. Any king has subjects, those that give him honor and serve him. Stripped of literally everything, this Jesus has only mockers and torturers and executioners. A king speaks with authority. Through everything, this Jesus... is silent. Even the whole course of events here contradicts any idea of kingship. The people made *their* choice with their shouts of “Crucify him!” – and rejected the whole concept of the kingship of Jesus.

To be sure, as he hangs dying on the cross, the word “king” flies all around Jesus – but only as the punchline of some hideous joke. The nameplate they’ve nailed over him is meant to be a sneering cartoon caption, a slap in the face for both victim and viewer: “Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews.” The religious leaders are laughing: “If he *is* the Messiah, the *Chosen One* ...!” The empire’s troops are laughing: “If you are the King ...!” Even one of the empire’s victims, hanging next to him joins in the joke with his last, dying breaths: “Aren’t you the Messiah?” All three voices, the voice of religion, the voice of the empire, the voice of the empire’s victims, are roaring with laughter at the prospect of a king so powerless that he can’t even save himself. If he is the Messiah, “let him save himself,” says religion. “Save yourself,” says the empire. “Save yourself *and us!*” say the empire’s victims. “Christ *the King*” indeed. It just doesn’t seem to fit.

And the incongruity is even more striking if we look back (or forward) to the *beginning* of the story, to the Good News of the first Advent. The very first mention of a “kingdom” in Luke’s Gospel is from an angel. “He will reign forever,” Gabriel says to Mary, “and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Well, here at the end of the story, it looks for all the world as if

his kingdom, if he ever had one at all, has come to a grinding halt. It certainly looked that way at the place of the Skull.

And a survey of the current landscape seems to reinforce that conclusion. In our time, too, the overwhelming preponderance of evidence points directly *away* from the concept of Christ as King. As religion's leaders discuss the historical Jesus or debate at the intersection of the inclusivity of the Gospel and the reality of human sinfulness, the Kingship of Christ is somehow put on the back burner. While the religious discussion goes on in synods and sessions and conventions, the rest of our society alternates between co-opting the Kingdom of Christ to bolster their own point in every argument, personal and political, or deliberately declaring Christ irrelevant to the conversation all together. To be sure, there was a time when society's victims, those who live at the fringes of society, impoverished, outcast, enslaved – to be sure, there was a time when at least *these* turned to Christ as their one hope. Now it seems that these, too, find no place for the King of Glory amid their bitterness and anger. The religious leaders, the empire, the empire's victims are *still* laughing at Christ as they did that dark afternoon on that hill outside Jerusalem.

But now a strange thing occurs. Someone at the place of the Skull turns to Jesus and hands these words to him: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He is a thief and perhaps a murderer, a convicted and condemned criminal – literally the text calls him a "sinner." I think it's worth noticing that in all of Luke's Gospel, only three characters actually speak the word "kingdom." Gabriel says it first. Jesus says it again and again and again. Then, here on the cross, when Jesus will say it no more, a convict dying at his side does so. On one side of all Jesus's stories and teachings about the kingdom, an angel. On the other side, a sinner. "His *kingdom*," says the angel, speaking for God. "Your *kingdom*," says the sinner, speaking for *us*.

With that utterance, the Kingship of Christ suddenly grows apparent, if not yet fully visible. It's as if the air around the naked, bleeding, dying Jesus shimmers, revealing him wrapped in brilliant, regal light. For one brief moment the fire re-enters his eyes, for one brief moment, he is again fully alive, for one brief moment, he regains his speech. And what regal, sovereign, kingly speech! "Truly I tell you," he says, "today you will be with me in Paradise." He speaks like one of the kings in his own parables, serenely lavishing staggering gifts on a stunned, improbable recipient. "Remember me when..." is indeed a modest request. But Jesus replies with extravagant majesty. Sovereign of more than his petitioner can ask or imagine, he grants him the whole great garden of God.

From this story two realities emerge about the reign of Christ the King. The first is that the reign of Christ in this world is often hidden for now – hidden in ridicule, hidden in apathy, hidden even in suffering. The dying Christ didn't seem a king at all at the place of the Skull, and very often we can't see it today. The cause of Christ, by all appearances, isn't doing very well. Where darkness so often gobbles up light, where madmen hijack planes and bomb buildings and mail pestilence, where governments and institutions can find no other choices but violence born of frustration or appeasement born of self interest, where violent evil wields an ugly hammer on nails through the frail flesh of humanity, the passionate Christ seems to writhe in terrible silence beneath the pain, bearing it to transformations that are all too often hidden from our all too limited sight.

Yet... there are moments – moments when the majesty of the hidden Sovereign shines through like sudden bursts of light. There are breakthroughs of gladness. There are penetrations of power. There are epiphanies of salvation. There are moments where signs of the Kingship of Christ are glimpsed, and the Gospel story suggests that these will more likely appear when someone has dared to speak it. In the topsy-turvy, pulled 'round on itself world of the Gospel, the criminal calls forth the king. Someone calls to Jesus over the world's mocking laughter. Someone calls out for hope from the realization of their own wretchedness. Someone lifts the kingdom to a prayer and says, "*Your* kingdom, Lord!" And the battered face turns... the terrible silence breaks... and a *King* responds.

Perhaps the world might get more glimpses of the regal face of Christ if his *Church* were to speak and to act as if a King were among us. It is significant that the voice that acknowledged the Kingship of Christ at the place of the Skull... is the voice of a sinner. Which means it might as well be *your* voice. It might as well be *your* voice. It might as well be *my* voice – a sinner, justly condemned and dying, yet able to turn the face of the Suffering Sovereign hanging by our side, able to call the reality of the heavenly into the confusion and violence and the despair of our own world, able to redeem our own existence with a simple prayer that he himself has taught us.

Will we allow the world around us to continue to suffer, without truth, without faith, without hope? Will the Church stand idly by, silent as our King waits? Here with one foot planted in the first advent, and the other in the last advent, will we who have already been saved remain silent while all around us are cries for salvation? Or will we call the King of Glory to be also the King of our world – with that simple prayer... “Thy Kingdom come!” Amen.