

Christ the King 2016 Luke 23:32-43

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

The last line of scripture on the last Sunday of the church year. The last thing we hear from Luke before we turn back to the gospel of Matthew for next year’s readings.

It seems like an odd thing to be reading on this last day of the church year—the story of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Especially when the last day of the church year is called “Christ the King” Sunday.

In a country that claims democracy as its political system, and a religious tradition that avoids lofty phraseology in its theology, the idea of Christ as king may seem pompous and overblown, especially when we consider the life of Jesus, the way he lived and the people he championed. After all, kings are grand people who wear grand clothing and do grand things—they’re not itinerant preachers who walk dusty roads and depend on others to support them. Kings are distinguished and dignified—well, except perhaps Henry VIII perhaps --and would never consort with the poor, the lawbreakers, the lowlife of society. And kings protect their kingdoms by fighting to defend them or to take over other kingdoms—use of force is always acceptable when their empire is concerned.

And so it may be hard to wrap our heads around this day with its image of Christ as King. It is for me; just trying to put together some coherent words that reflect my understanding of it is difficult. Especially when I read our gospel passage that details the crucifixion. How can this man who was hung on a cross be considered a king and does it have anything to do with us?

As we read the passage from Luke we wonder how we got here. Even if we’ve been following the story it seems almost impossible that Jesus was important enough to be crucified. I mean, we know the story, we know about the discomfort that Jesus brought to the Pharisees; we may even have caught on by now to the fact that Jesus made everyone in power uncomfortable, including the Romans. But to crucify him? He wasn’t preaching insurrection, at least not as far as the gospels tell it; he didn’t claim kingship for himself or seek any kind of political power. He did call out the powerful for their abysmal treatment of the poor and oppressed, seeking to redirect the focus of religious practice, which did threaten the status quo that had grown between the Pharisees and the Romans.

In the passage we see Jesus at the center of things: the people standing watch, the religious leaders scoffing, the soldiers mocking and casting lots for his clothing. Between two prisoners, one who derided him. “Save yourself!” they all demand.

Save yourself. It’s what the broken world demands of us, the lie we tell ourselves because believing in a salvation beyond ourselves is too hard, seems too difficult. We seek more and more control over our lives because the broken world tells us it’s not only possible but the only way.

The idea of Jesus the Christ as king flies in the face of all that. Jesus, fully human, fully divine, was with God from the beginning, as the Word, as the Christ; in fact as the Companion to the Book of Common Worship says, In Christ all things began and all things will be fulfilled. In his kingdom the *other* will be helped, evil will be met with good, forgiveness is offered even to those who do evil, and the prisoner is set free. Not the response of the broken world, which turns away from the *other*, which believes and spreads the lies of evil and which imprisons us with those lies.

And this is where the power of Christ comes in, the special power that turns what we have come to expect from the world on its head and brings new life and new perspective to it. Through him we have the power to heal broken relationships and family systems; to comfort the bereaved and the sick and

suffering; to work for justice for oppressed people everywhere; to support struggling families and hungry children. These are not things that the world is interested in- our world is an individualistic, pull yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of place in which, if you believe in ideals such as peace and justice and compassion you are likely to be labeled as politically correct or weak or socialist. But the work of Jesus Christ in the world, the work we are called and commissioned by him to do, transcends labels and politics and all of the things that the world values so highly. The work of Jesus Christ is hopeful, is merciful and compassionate, is loving and caring and peaceful. If this sounds utopian, well, isn't that what the kingdom of God should be? A wonderful utopian ideal? Where there is no suffering or sorrow, no pain, no violence, no darkness?

This week is Thanksgiving, and I find it interesting that the world is doing its best to obliterate Thanksgiving, to minimize it and skip over it almost in the mad dash to Christmas. Perhaps it's because it's a holiday that can't be capitalized on very easily, can't be corrupted by compelling people to buy things other than food and maybe some decorations. Perhaps it's because it's a holiday that, even though it has roots in early Christians in this country, also has its roots in Native Americans loving their neighbors and as such transcends religion so that it's become the great American holiday that is celebrated by everyone. Everyone can kind of give their own flavor to the holiday—some have a meal of turkey and dressing, very traditional; some have tamales, some kung pao chicken; some come together with their families of origin and some come together with friends and even strangers who cannot get to their own families—or perhaps have no families of their own to celebrate with. Some cook at home and some go out to eat because they can no longer cook for themselves or perhaps it is only them and cooking a whole turkey is silly. Some watch football and parades; some play games and some families fight over dinner. It is a holiday that I think Christ would have loved because it is about giving thanks for what you have and sharing what you can with others. It is a holiday that at its best can be subversively about working for the kingdom of God because it is all about peace, justice, love, and hope.

The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is all about these things: peace, justice, love and hope. The wandering preacher who died on a cross becomes the servant king who loves us all and encourages us to love others (and especially “the others”, the stranger in our midst, the ones who cannot help themselves.) A servant king who sought justice from an imperial system and offers hope for reconciliation in a broken world. Through Christ we see the world not only as it is but as it can be and was created to be—perfect, beautiful, complete. Where no one goes hungry for any reason. Where children are welcomed and blessed. Where the castoffs of society find a place to be. Where love wins. Amen.