

The Feast of Christ the King

Preached at St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Luke 23:33-43

Proper 29: 11/21/2010

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Have you ever walked in on the middle of a movie? You did not see the beginning. And the end is still a complete mystery to you. All that you know is what you see going on directly in front of you. The cast is just a jumble of unknown characters and the plot is confusing.

The same is true of our human predicament. We have walked in on the middle of the great drama between divinity and humanity. A dance, if you will, of creation and the fall, of forgiveness and redemption, of covenantal promises made and promises broken over and over again, of great joy and great pain, of life and death, of deliverance and salvation. But we are human beings. We see only what is just before us. We missed the beginning of the drama and the ending is still a mystery to us because we live in the present.

In this morning's Gospel, Luke takes us back in time to an event that took place over 2,000 ago years ago, to a place just outside the walls of Jerusalem, a terrible place called Golgotha from the Aramaic and Calvari or Calvary from the ancient Latin word for skull. The place of the skull was a place for the beheading and execution of criminals. Here we become members of the cast standing atop this hill watching the horror of Good Friday unfold before our eyes. Like Mary the Mother of Jesus, like the Apostle John and the women that accompanied them to this place, so too we stand in that crowd watching Jesus on the cross. We are witnessing the awful carnage of innocent suffering and death. We ask the most human question of all, why?

Luke has softened the dark gloom of Mark and Matthew's account of the terror and horror of a Roman crucifixion and soothed the terrifying agony of Jesus' death. However, none of the evangelists can steel themselves to describe at length the actual crucifixion. In Luke's account, the crowd stands silently and in the end returns repentant and forgiven to Jerusalem. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is not heard to cry out from the lonely abandonment of his soul. In Luke, Jesus peacefully commends his soul to his Father.

What Luke does show us on Golgotha, this place called the skull, is the place of our own pain and suffering. Golgotha is the place of our own worst fears. It is where we find our guilt and shame. It is the place of our deepest and darkest secrets that we can barely reveal to ourselves never mind the world. On Golgotha we experience our crucifixion and ourselves nailed to our own crosses.

However, Golgotha is the place, this terrible place, where we find redemption and salvation. Here, Jesus forgives. He not only forgives the soldiers who scourged him to the point of death, and then drove 7 inch army nails into his wrists and feet, He forgives the leaders of his own people who conspired and screamed for his death. Golgotha is the place where Jesus forgave them and Golgotha is the place where Jesus forgives you and me. This scene is the culmination of a theme that runs its' course throughout the entire Gospel. Throughout, Luke shows Jesus continually exercising his ministry of forgiveness. This place of the skull will be no different than any other place Jesus forgave sins, only here we see Jesus on the cross in agony forgiving you and me, as well.

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. This is the final Sunday of our church year. Next Sunday we begin a new year and a new Advent. But today, Christ the King is nailed to a cross and we are

standing at the foot of the cross listening to the Pharisees, Scribes and priests scoff at him saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one.” The soldiers mock him as well saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” Remember, Pontius Pilate had the soldiers place an inscription over his head, “This is the King of the Jews.” And finally, the last taunt, comes from a criminal crucified with Jesus. Luke writes, “One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us from the cross.”

My dear friends in Christ it is the “AND US” spoken from the cross of a nameless suffering criminal over 2,000 years ago that rings through the centuries and into our own ears and into our own hearts this morning. In our reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, the Apostle writes, “You Christ are the visible likeness of the invisible God. You Christ created the heavens and the earth. You Christ are the head of the church. You Christ are the first born of the dead.” I think it begs the question, that if Jesus is all of these things, if Jesus is the visible presence of the invisible God, if Jesus is the creator of all the galaxies, if Jesus is the first born of the dead, shouldn’t you be able to save yourself

from the cross, Jesus? And us, shouldn't you be able to save us from the crosses we must bear, Jesus?

Isn't that our question as well? Jesus Christ, if you are the Son of God, why didn't you save yourself from the cross?

Why don't you save us from our crosses? If you are the Son of God Jesus, how is it that we buried a 50 year old woman last Monday from this church only after she was crucified to a bed of pain and suffering that lasted for more than half of her adult life? If you are the Son of God Jesus, then why didn't you save her and her loved ones from this terrible cross? If you really are God, why don't you intervene? Why don't you save us from the indignity and pain of the myriad of diseases that afflict us? Jesus, if you are the Son of God, why don't you take those crosses off our backs? And if you cannot save these people from the cross, if you cannot save us from our cross, then perhaps you are not the Son of God after all.

Then what kind of king are you? What does it mean for you to be called Christ the King when you allow so much suffering on earth?

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we are at the very heart of the mystery of God, the mystery of the universe and at the very mystery of love. God chose to experience the place of the greatest pain on the cross.

In the cross, we meet the very mystery of God where God chose not to avoid the suffering of this world. We are standing at the foot of the cross looking up and into the face of the suffering Christ looking up at the very heart of the incomprehensible mystery of God which is symbolized by the cross.

But then, the scene dramatically changes. Another voice crucified to another cross speaks only this time the “AND US” has been silenced and now the voice of belief, the voice of faith and repentance speaks loud and clear. “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.” Those last seven glorious words Jesus spoke to a human being, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” echoes across centuries and centuries of time and into our ears and hearts this morning. Words from over 2,000 years ago spoken to a condemned criminal suffering on a cross. That criminal is the first Christian to confess his belief in Christ and to die in faith. That thief at the very last minutes of his life becomes

a model for us and for the Christian life. This is the culmination of Jesus of Jesus mission and ministry on earth.

Forgiveness is always extended to us by God and faith in His Son Jesus is always and under any circumstances offered by us means that Jesus says to that thief and to you and me, “Today you will be with me in paradise. Thanks be to God. Amen.