

November 21, 2010

**The Last Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 23:33-43

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Today is known by some in the Christian tradition as *Christ the King Sunday*. In theory, this is a wonderful idea: Celebrating the royalty of the one true King of All, setting aside time for us to remember the regency of the Divine.

Interesting, isn't it, that on this Feast of Christ the King, when we are poised to celebrate the incredible and all-encompassing authority of Christ, that we are presented with a Gospel passage like this one, of Jesus' darkest hour. When I first read it, I could not possibly imagine what the lectionary committee was thinking. Betrayed, beaten, and mocked, our broken King hangs from the cross.

Christ the King is, here, "King of the Jews", an inscription hanging over his head meant to be a joke, another mockery of his life's work, his word of justice and truth, the predictions of his glorious coming.

This can't be our King and there seems certainly nothing to celebrate, instead, much to mourn. And here he hangs, dying, on the cross. Many dreams are being mocked and are dying with Him. It is a dark day in Luke's Gospel.

Our passage from Jeremiah tells us that God was to raise up a king who "shall reign... and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." The people of Israel were expecting a king like David, who would drive out the oppressive forces of the Roman government with an iron fist, with a sword, with war if need be.

What a shock to the downtrodden Israel when their "savior" came from a manger, born to an unwed mother. What a disappointment when their new "messiah" brought not a sword but a few years of healing and teaching. What a defeat when their "king" was crucified, killed with criminals, by the very government they thought he was sent to overthrow.

Christ the *earthly* king was a failure.

He did not wreak havoc on the Roman government.

He did not end oppression or raise Israel to its preferred status as "chosen."

He did not bring an end to poverty, pain, suffering or evil.

He did not execute justice and righteousness in all the land.

Judah was not saved and Israel did not live in safety.

It seems like a morose passage for such a celebratory day.

In celebrating the sovereignty of Christ by reading about the crucifixion, we are making the cross his throne and the height from which he hung the height from which he rules. By celebrating Christ the King Sunday with this passage, we are proclaiming that the power of Christ is in his death.

This is not the image of Christ the king that I choose to accept. We must hear this part of the Gospel tonight, this hard painful truth, but more importantly, we must know that this isn't the end of the story.

We must not accept this as our image of Christ the king, because by accepting it, we accept the violence, the hate, the misunderstanding, the ignorance and the abuse that put him there.

Christ is the king above all of that, above all of this. Christ is the king risen. Risen above blood, gore, destruction, pain. Christ is the king that conquers that cross, smashes it to splinters.

When you look around our church, with the exception of the crucifixion window here on the right, our images of crosses are empty. On the prayer book, on the altar, on the wallpaper, on the kneelers. This isn't an accident or a design choice, but a theological statement. The empty cross is a cross where Christ is no longer, a cross which Christ has conquered.

Jesus took on the full range of human experience in his years on earth: deep love of his friends and family, the sadness of loss, the disappointment of betrayal, the pain of death.

But we must remember, my friends, that it wasn't the death that brought Christianity into the world. It wasn't that horrible death that turned this world upside down, but the life, the resurrection and the reign.

And because of that life, that resurrection and that reign, we know that we ourselves are impervious to death. Because of his great resurrection, *not his death, but his resurrection*, when those we love leave this world, and when we follow them, we will be accepted into a life eternal.

That is the promise of Christ the King. Not death, but life.

Christ once disguised as a shattered and ruined earthly "King of the Jews" is truly the king of all things. Christ was bigger than the emperor of Rome, bigger than presidents, bigger than nations, bigger than war.

What does it mean to be a citizen of Christ's holy kingdom? First and foremost it means that we do not own justice. We do not own righteousness, nor can we confer it upon anyone we choose.

Sometimes this can come in the defiant form of the first bandit: “Save yourself and us.” How often do you find yourself demanding God to be the Savior that *you* need God to be?

“Prove yourself,” we challenge God, “Give me what *I* want, what *I* think *I* deserve. Or I will take it upon myself.” It is when the world is tumbling down around *us*, good people, *Christians*, that we call to God in this way.

It is our own self-righteousness, our own mocking of the hanging Messiah that causes us to believe that justice is ours to meet out.

Secondly, to be a citizen of heaven means to follow the example of the earthly Christ who came not with a sword, but with love, to heal and teach. We are called to emulate the earthly example of our heavenly King.

We are called to try and walk as Jesus Christ walked, stumbling in our awkward humanness but still trying. This walk, this journey, toward the kingdom of heaven is what makes us Christians, imperfect and broken but striving for justice and righteousness.

Thirdly, to be a citizen of heaven means that we are loved deeply, forgiven through the blood of the Lamb and never forgotten. Being a citizen of the kingdom of heaven means owning and living up to love that we receive but have never earned.

Next week, Advent begins, and while at the mall, they will be playing Christmas carols that sing “Joy to the World, the Savior reigns”, we won’t be singing that yet. We won’t be celebrating, yet, the newborn baby with the weight of the world on his tiny shoulders.

We are waiting for the birth of our King, born humbly and laid in a bed of straw. We are waiting for the life of our King, teaching peace and wholeness. We are waiting for the death and resurrection of Christ our King, who takes away the sins of the world.

While we are waiting, we will hear ancient stories about the deep need in this broken world. A need for this child, this God-Man, this Jesus, who will die as humanly and as humbly as he was born. But more importantly, who will conquer death and reign, Christ the eternal King, over all of heaven and earth.