

Christ the King Sunday

November 20, 2016

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Luke 23:33-43

Christ Our King!

“When they arrived at the place called the Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left.”

Why does the text for Christ the King Sunday begin with Jesus’ crucifixion? We haven’t visited this text since Good Friday. Somehow it seems Christ became King by allowing himself to be crucified. That makes no sense. It defies reason. Instead of having attendants on either side waiting on him hand and foot, this king allows himself to be enthroned on a cross between two thieves. He is utterly powerless, nailed as he is to his throne, and alone in the middle of humanity. Many of the people standing before him hate him and believe they are doing God’s will in condemning him.

“Father, forgive them; for they don’t know what they are doing,” is Jesus’ reply. The people casting him out are participating in a ritual humans have been exercising since civilization began. They are throwing someone out in an attempt to keep the peace within their own group and the other groups they hate. They are creating a false unity through exclusion; an “us” and a “them.” Actually they are fractured and contentious; these Romans and Jews, none of whom get along with each other. Ordinarily they fight and their squabbles are ferocious but today, as they prepare to crucify him, they are united.

At the place called The Skull they all agree that Jesus is the problem and must be sacrificed. As they pour their venom on him they feel better; purged somehow, calmer inside, and less afraid. The soldiers who administer this execution make a game of gambling to see who gets his clothing. They are in a playful mood.

Meanwhile some people stood by watching; not knowing what to think but strangely attracted. These are the same people who had participated the day before in requesting his execution. Are they beginning to doubt the ‘rightness of it all? Something huge is going on but it is impossible to sort out and so they just watch and wait.

The leaders are not afflicted with second thoughts. They continue to make fun of Jesus. They note with self-congratulatory glee how powerless he is. God’s “chosen one” can’t save himself and they laugh as though saving yourself were the highest confirmation of power. It never occurs to them that in dying he is saving them.

The soldiers join in the fun. They “also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.’” For the first time the word ‘king’ has been broached. Is this why this text is used on Christ the King Sunday?

Luke tells us they installed a sign above Jesus’ head that reads “This is the King of the Jews.” The words drip with sarcasm. For years Jews had believed a king, a “righteous Branch” was coming who would deliver them from the Romans. In their most expansive moments this king would be a gift to the whole world. The Romans mock the Jews and say “Look at your king now?” This is what happens to kings who don’t come from Rome.

The thieves on either side of Jesus don’t agree with each other. One joins the leaders and soldiers in ridiculing Jesus. The other rebukes the first noting that both of them deserve their punishment for Jesus has done nothing wrong. The second recognizes that Jesus is an innocent man.

Using James Alison’s interesting image, what if all of this is a “strange act of communication?” Alison halts time like a photograph at the moment just before the crucifixion ends and pictures a meteor that has entered earth’s atmosphere and is about to make contact with the earth. Upon impact the earth will be changed forever and a new kind of kingdom will began to be seen. This kingdom is still in formation but the meteor’s impact that started it has already happened. It happened between two thieves when the central figure in history became human and allowed himself to be crucified to show us what we do. This is “the strange act of communication.”

When meteors hit the earth they create a huge concavity, a hole that gives witness to the meteors density, speed and power. Some say the Hudson Bay in Canada or the Caribbean basin may have been caused by a meteor. Alison poses that Jesus’ death was like a meteor hitting the earth and what gets blown out when Jesus dies is death itself. A kingdom without death or the threat of it, without coercion or aggression is a new kingdom unlike any on this earth. This is the kingdom Jesus brings and he is its king.

When Jesus died and rose again and his followers had time to absorb the truth of it, it impacted them like a meteor hitting earth and changed them forever. In the text from Colossians the writer measures the immensity of Jesus’ impact. He searches for phrases strong enough to capture the density and power of an event that changed all life on the planet forever. Here is what the writer said about Jesus the Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God....He rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son....He enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light....In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

At the core of the meteoric event, the thing that blew out death, was Jesus from the cross saying, "Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." Before the crucifixion the human race was in the grip of something they didn't understand and were powerless to change. Humans simply couldn't see it. When they executed an innocent man they were sure he was guilty. When they wiped out a foreign people, they were convinced some God had told them to do it. But the innocent man Jesus, God's Son, changed all that and set loose a new awareness in history. By allowing humans to do to him what humans routinely do to each other, Jesus reveals it. After that the genie could no longer be put back in the bottle. The irreplaceability of the genie is what gives me hope in our wild world. Once we see it we can't un-see it.

James Alison puts it beautifully: "We are on the receiving end of an act of communication from someone who knows all about us, is not taken in by us, is not concerned by how little good we are, and yet, even so, wants to take us to another place." This other place is Jesus' new kingdom that begins here but does not end and is characterized by love, compassion and gentleness toward all.

Jesus is an act of communication, a strange act totally outside our experience and contrary to the ways of our world. His willingness to enter history, endure what we did to him to show us what we do, reveals him as a king willing to be for us in a way beyond our imagination.

Somehow it all comes back to Jesus between two thieves. His willingness to be powerless reveals his power. It has the power of a meteor hitting earth. We attached the Creator of all things visible and invisible to a cross and he allowed it and then forgave us. It was a strange act of communication. His willingness to do this out of love makes Christ our King. Amen.