

A Sermon by Fr. Wood

The Feast of Christ the King

Jeremiah 23.1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1.11-20

Luke 23.35-43

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Consider for a moment the images in today's liturgy. The Introit for the Feast of Christ the King: "Worthy is the Lamb . . . to receive power and glory and wisdom and strength and honour." Jeremiah prophesies a king to "reign" and "execute judgment and justice in the earth." The language from Colossians may even be grander: Christ is "the image (*icon*) of the invisible God . . . for by him were all things created," even earthly "thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers" were created by and for him.

In stark contrast to these images hangs the figure of Jesus of Nazareth on a cross in Luke's gospel, a text seemingly better suited for Good Friday than for Christ the King. Even the subtle reminders of kingship here are inverted, twisted, turned back on themselves. A banner could be a symbol of kingship, but the inscription above Jesus' cross was obvious mockery.¹ Or think of the royal court. Royal propaganda portrayed kings with powerful men at their right and left hands (remember in Matthew's gospel James' and John's mother wanted her sons to sit in the positions of honor at Jesus' left and right hands when he came into his kingdom. (Matt. 20.21)). Luke's Jesus doesn't have powerbrokers; he has criminals at his left and right.

Yet what Raymond Brown says makes this story a "masterpiece of Lucan theology"² is the conversation between Jesus and these two criminals. Most scholars believe Mark's gospel was written first, and Luke probably had it in front of him when he wrote his gospel. To this point Luke has closely followed Mark's arrangement of the events of Jesus' life, but suddenly Luke throws in a conversation that doesn't show up in any of the other gospels at all. In Matthew and Mark *both* criminals mocked Jesus; in Luke, only *one* reviles. Luke has been clear from the beginning that he's writing what he considers an "orderly account" of everything that happened in Jesus' life (Luke 1.3), so what is he asking us to see in drawing this scene out?

Look for a moment at the text itself. In all the gospels Jesus was mocked, and here the taunt is from the leaders, the soldiers, and one of the crucified criminals: "If you are the Christ – if you are who you say you are – then prove it:

1 The letters INRI, or the words IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDÆORVM, on the *titulus* stand for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

2 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997): 260.

save yourself.” It’s not like Jesus hadn’t heard words like these before. At the beginning of Jesus’ public life, the devil tempted him in the wilderness: “If you are the son of God . . . turn stones to bread.” (Luke 4.3) So if Jesus is a king, he isn’t one who insists on having his own needs met (turning stones to bread), who is obsessed with power (he refused Satan’s offer of all the kingdoms of this world), or is protected from harm (whom angels would protect if he had thrown himself from the pinnacle of the temple). In fact, Jesus is the *opposite*, a king who became hungry, turned his back on his rightful power, and asked protection of no one. Jesus was willing to be stripped naked, beaten and nailed open for the whole world to see. No other religion holds up a crucified man and says “worship him as God.” So what are we to do with this strange paradox of a crucified king?

It’s the second criminal, the one who speaks so conspicuously only in Luke among all the gospels, that Luke uses as a model of what to do with this king. First, he knows himself. He says to his companion, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds” Some translations call these two “thieves,” but the KJV “malefactors” is actually a better translation of the Greek word *kakourgos*, a combination of the words *kakos* (“evil”) and *ergon* (“deed”).³ This criminal knew himself – he was a bad guy who had done bad things – but he also knew Jesus had been innocent and unjustly condemned to die. “We are punished justly . . . but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23.41) And whether or not he completely understood what was going on around him, for whatever reason he showed faith in asking Jesus to remember him when he does come to reign.

To this faith, Jesus responds: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” We’re trying to teach Ellie and Patrick about manners, and sometime we’ll have to try and get them to say “I beg your pardon.” To most people a pardon is “what the president does on his way out of office,” but the power to pardon made it into the Constitution as a remnant of the royal prerogative of kings. On the cross, Jesus is stripped of all the trappings of kingly power, except this one. One commentary puts it this way:

What *really* makes a king? You can strip away all the pomp and circumstance, all the show, all the public demonstrations of power, all the wealth, perhaps even the last shred of human dignity. On the cross, what makes the king has nothing to do with ermine, gold, and courtly retinues. On the cross, the only way to recognize this crucified king is in his power to pardon Follow Jesus to the cross and watch every external sign of his kingship stripped away – save one: his power to pardon [] the *ungodly*. Against all odds and despite all the evidence, Luke’s second thief saw the king

³ See Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965): III: 484; Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000): 502.

on his crude throne.⁴

Luke asks us: “Do you see?” Despite appearances, Jesus *was*, in fact, a king.

If we do see, if the church confesses *this* king as its Lord, it changes how we see ourselves, and it changes how we see other people.

(1) It changes how we see ourselves. We are all malefactors, but God loves us, regardless of what we’ve done. Do you really believe that? Brennan Manning asks this question:

Do we rely on our résumé or the gospel of grace? How do we cope with failure? “Grace tells us that we are accepted just as we are. We may not be the kind of people we want to be, we may be a long way from our goals, we may have more failures than achievements, we may not be wealthy or powerful or spiritual, we may not even be happy, but we are nonetheless accepted by God, held in his hands. Such is his promise to us in Jesus Christ, a promise we can trust.”⁵

(2) When we see ourselves like that, it also changes how we look at other people. We can’t stand in condemnation over other people because we know we’re not morally superior to anybody. And we can have a curious hope about people because of what Karl Barth calls the “strange judgment” by which we are justified through the merits of Christ. Barth is one of only two theologians I can read and not have it be work but pure joy. He writes: “If this strange judgment had not taken place, there would only be a lost world and lost men. Since it has taken place, we can only recognise and believe and proclaim to the whole world and all men: *Not lost*.”⁶ Think of the person you know who is the most antagonistic to God, the last person you’d catch inside a church, the person to whom you’d be most afraid to admit you’re actually a Christian. That person can never stand beyond the reach of grace because the figures on these crucifixes show us the lengths to which Jesus went to reconcile us – all of us – to God.

Luke’s criminal saw a “king on his crude throne.”

What do you see?

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen*.

4 David L. Tiede, et al., *New Proclamation: Year C, 2007: Easter Through Christ the King* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2006): 290.

5 Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000): 112 (quotation omitted).

6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1 § 59 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956): 222 (emphasis added).