

“The Power To Promise” – Luke 23:32-43 – Nov 24, 2013

Do you find it perhaps more than a little bit odd that while the world around us is fully into Christmas decorations, jingles and themes, we’re reading a text from the bible that presents part of Jesus’ death on the cross? I agree – at first it did seem a bit odd to me, but once I started to think about it, it began to make some sense. Follow me through the logic, and perhaps you’ll agree with me.

And we are fully into the Christmas retail season, aren’t we?! The emails are flooding in offering “Black Friday” deals – and no, there’s no connection with our gospel reading by an oblique reference to ‘Good Friday’ ... the term ‘Black Friday’ refers to the day after Thanksgiving in the United States. But whether south of the border or here in Canada the phenomenon is the same ... lights and decorations abound.

It’s funny and yet more than a little bit sad that the drive to commercialize Christmas has helped put the church and society completely out of sync. While the world now starts to celebrate Christmas earlier and earlier **before** Christmas, the church uses that time – which we call Advent – to build up to the great event, and then to celebrate it for weeks **afterwards**, at a time when the world has quickly moved on to push Christmas aside with New Years celebrations. And so it seems perhaps somewhat strange that while society around us is gearing up with “Silver Bells” and “Ho-Ho-Ho’s” our lectionary gospel reading focuses on the crucifixion of Christ – his death on the cross.

The reason for this reading is that in the yearly cycle of worship, today is Christ the King Sunday, or in more neutral gender terms the Reign of Christ Sunday. This is the day upon which we focus our attention and faith on Christ as the one who proclaimed and who will usher in God’s holy kingdom. Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year – 51 weeks after we last began and one week before we begin again to anticipate the birth of Jesus. This is the moment when we wrap up, when we reflect, when we pause to consider what Christ did, and more importantly to contemplate the meaning and impact of what Christ did for us. In this meaningful way we prepare ourselves to celebrate anew his birth. It is the death – and resurrection – that give meaning to the birth of Christ; without those momentous events there would be no Christmas. To be sure, there would be other religious and pagan festivals at the same time of year, especially since it is the time when the darkness begins to shorten and we look forward to another summer. But without the death and resurrection of Jesus there would be no Christmas, and so as we prepare to celebrate that blessed event it is truly appropriate for us to pause and reflect on the meaning of Jesus’ life.

Throughout the past year we have looked at many incidents and events in the life and ministry of Jesus, and now we are reflecting upon the end of his earthly ministry. In our gospel reading we heard Luke’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus – an account that is considerably less graphic than that of John and Matthew. Both the birth and the death of Jesus have prompted great waves of emotion among his followers, and have led to the creation of untold expressions in music, art, poem and song. There is indeed great sadness over Jesus’ death. But Luke understands what people often forget, that the significance of that event does not lie in the flow of our tears, but in the flow of his blood. We confess at the heart of our creed, “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried”, and the church continues to struggle to discern the meaning.

Luke separates the details of that dramatic moment into three parts. In the first part he sets the scene. No Aramaic “Golgotha” nor Latin “Calvary” for Luke – simply “The Skull”, invoking images of a smooth and barren rounded hilltop with death hovering in the background.

People are assembled – the soldiers and the leaders, mocking Jesus with two titles, Messiah and Chosen One, taunting and tempting him to use his power, if he has any, to save himself. The crowd is there, standing silent, overwhelmed and helpless under the combined power of state and religion. The disciples, we will later discover, men and women both, watched from a distance.

Luke then turns our attention to the three on the crosses. First, we hear a word of forgiveness from Jesus – the well-known “for they know not what they do” utterance, an echo of the consistently pastoral message in all of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness and love of enemies. That expression would be a word of kindness if uttered by anyone – but when it comes from the lips of the one given by God all authority to forgive, it is the most powerful of statements.

And finally we have the opportunity and privilege to overhear the conversation between Jesus and the two criminals suffering the same fate. The one criminal taunts Jesus with the same challenge put forth by the religious leaders and soldiers alike, and for the third time he hears, “If you truly are the Messiah, save yourself”. Naturally enough the criminal, with a very vested interest, includes “and save us” as well! But it is the other criminal who we remember best, who rebukes his companion in crime with the admonition “we deserve what we’re getting – this man doesn’t, he has done nothing wrong”, acknowledges Jesus’ kingly power and receives a promise of a place in Paradise, normally considered the reward for the righteous.

Is that not one of the most annoying examples of God’s grace – that a common criminal, guilty by self-admission, receives at the very last minute forgiveness from God and a promise of paradise? Is that not also one of the places where society and the church go such different ways? For the most part, yes, but again sadly many within the church are also following society’s path here, angry and upset at God’s grace for others instead of celebrating that “that which was lost has been found.”

There is a common misunderstanding today that somehow Christianity is about earning our way into favour with God. A belief that somehow by being nice, by observing strict rules of ethics and behaviours, that we can somehow convince God that we are good enough to be accepted by him. That is why we find stories like the woman at the well so troubling, and this story of the thief on the cross being so upsetting. “It’s not fair!” people cry. “How can that person, who has lived a life of sin, be so readily accepted, when I’ve had to struggle so hard for so long to be righteous?!” They’re right. God’s grace is not fair – at least in human terms. Thank God that through Christ’s death and resurrection God’s grace is available to sinners who believe – to ordinary people like you and me.

That is what is at the core of this portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus. Luke is pointing out to us in his wonderfully dramatic way not only that Jesus had the power of God to forgive, to proclaim and dispense God’s mercy. As we hear the story, and hear the soldiers and the leaders mocking Jesus we are struck by the divine irony of them challenging Jesus about being King of the Jews, and we want to shout to them that he is all of that and more in ways they could not imagine. As we hear the second criminal acknowledge the kingship of Jesus we want to yell out a loud “Hallelujah!”, because we know from his resurrection that the promise he made to that criminal would indeed be fulfilled that very day. We also know that the promise of salvation offered to us was sealed for us on that same fateful day, because he had the power to promise, and the power of God to deliver on that promise.

That’s the powerful underlying message of this final act of the true power of God at work in Christ – although Jesus was more than able to save himself, by his death he saved us instead, by his rising again he has confirmed that saving action, and he will assert it for all time when he comes in glory in his Kingdom. In that final message of acceptance to the second criminal Jesus

offers us a wealth of images about his true power: it's never too late; the slightest belief in and acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah, as Redeemer is sufficient to be accepted into his kingdom, to be reconciled with and admitted into the presence of God; the use of that saving power is to be selfless, not selfish.

The death of Jesus – overcome by his resurrection – is arguably the most profound moment of all time. We understand and believe it to be the moment when he took upon himself our sins, giving to us the most significant gift possible, the gift of life itself, life abundant and eternal, life in the glorious presence of God, with all rejoicing and thanksgiving. Compared to that event all the trinkets and glitz and trivia of the Christmas celebrations pale in insignificance. Now don't misunderstand me – I love the lights, the decorations, and especially the big feasts as much as anybody, but there are moments when we need to pause and reflect on the greatness and the goodness of God, and this Sunday is one of the most appropriate times of the year to do so.

As we approach the Winter solstice the nights are long, the darkness seems to have conquered this part of the world, just as it did that fateful day Jesus died on the cross. As we make the transition from the end of Jesus' life and ministry on earth to his birth we feel the tingle of excited anticipation of light coming to flood the world – not only the light of longer days but more importantly the light of God's love made manifest in that baby in Bethlehem. Savour that anticipation. Relish in the excitement as it builds through Advent. And as you do that keep it in context, hang on to the sense of overwhelming awe from understanding the earth-changing importance of where the life and death and resurrection of that baby would lead, and what it means for you, for me, for all of us.

As we wrap up this Christian year, let us give thanks to God for the power given to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord to redeem us, and for the life-giving gift of his Holy Spirit, together one God now and forever, amen.