

**Luke 23:32-43 – “Divine Irony” – Nov 21, 2004 (Christ the King)**

I hope you'll forgive me for my usual rant on this Sunday about Christmas parades and all things about commercial Christmas. It's not just the traffic problems with the parade assembling at the corner that have me cranked – it's because today is quite possibly the second most important Sunday of the Christian year, and to have it trivialized so completely gets under my theological saddle like a burr. The most important Sunday is, of course, Easter Sunday, the day that we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, triumphant over even death itself, and declaring in that victory his One-ness with God.

But today is closely related, being Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ Sunday. This is the day upon which we focus our attention and faith on Christ as the one who ushers in God's holy kingdom. Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year – 51 weeks after we began to anticipate the birth of Jesus. It is a time to wrap up, to reflect, to consider what Christ did, and more importantly to contemplate the meaning and impact of what Christ did for us. It is a time to ponder, to savour anew these events that are more important than life itself, and I for one get a bit grumpy about being pushed prematurely into all the glitzy rinky-tink that is the modern commercial Christmas.

Enough of my personal grumbling - we still have a little time, measured in mere minutes, when we can do just that, ponder and savour the most momentous moments of Jesus. 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 and/or read Luke's account of the crucifixion of Jesus – an account that is considerably less graphic than that of John and Matthew, and which certainly has none of the gore of Mel's movie. 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 our flow of tears, but in his flow of 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 its meaning.

Luke separates the details here into three parts – the briefest of accounts of the crucifixion itself, set on the hill known as The Skull. No Aramaic “Golgotha” nor Latin “Calvary” for him – simply “The Skull”, invoking images of a smooth and barren rounded hilltop, and death hovering in the wings. 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.

And then our attention focuses on 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 consistent message in all of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness and love of enemies. It would be a word of kindness if uttered by anyone – to come from the lips of the one given by God all authority to forgive 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, the abode of the righteous dead.

We nod, we agree, we know the story so well. Why is it that we have so much trouble believing it, or living it? Why is it that we spend so much of our time standing back in the silent and helpless crowd? Why is it that so many people fall into the same mindset as the leaders and the soldiers and even the first criminal, demanding proof of God’s power at work in Jesus?

Ultimately, that’s what Luke was emphasizing in his account of the death of Jesus – namely the issue of the power of God in Jesus, his oneness with God, his position as Son of God, ruler of all things. For us there is a profound sense of irony – divine irony – in the taunting of Jesus by the leaders, by the soldiers, even by the first criminal on the cross. We know how the story turned out, we can ease away from the pain of the moment by remembering the resurrection, the encounter on the road to Emmaus, the Pentecost gift of the Holy Spirit. We know how the disciples were moved by the risen Christ to proclaim his act of salvation, his promise of forgiveness and reconciliation with God to all lands and all peoples. And because we know, we can shake our heads at the leaders and the soldiers and the criminal and hear the irony in their challenge to him “if you have the power, save yourself”. We can even sympathize with them – we can understand how they could feel that if he had God’s power at his command he could use it to end suffering and even to avoid death. If only they could

have known just how completely Jesus was indeed the Promised One, the Messiah, the King in God's Kingdom.

The sad part is that even though we understand the irony, even though we know the truth where they could not have known, we still do the same thing. Who among us has not ever approached Jesus in the same way, seeking his power for our own relief? We fervently pray, "Lord, you have the power to make all this go away [don't you?] – then why is it still happening to me?" Some of us are pretty subtle about how we demand that Jesus demonstrate his power, others are pretty open. There are whole branches of the Christian church or faith who proclaim a gospel of Jesus standing ready to unleash his power to guarantee that new job, fulfill a promise of abundant life with a sparkling new SUV, to ensure peace and prosperity (at least in this neighbourhood!), and even to cure acne. Overflowing bank accounts, a perfect family of 2.6 children, politeness and fixed smiles all around, great teeth, knees that don't hurt, and maybe, just maybe, a Grey Cup – imagine, all that can be yours through the munificent power of God at work in Jesus!

The down side of holding such beliefs is, of course, that life presents problems. Heart disease, cancer, automobile accidents, robberies, family fights, abuses of all kinds, just the plain old running-down of the aging process all conspire to attack a faith that is based on trinkets and rewards being proof of the power of God in Jesus. The issues of life, and death, and salvation, and entry into the Kingdom of God are much deeper, much more significant than all that.

And that is at the core of this portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus. Luke is pointing out to us in his wonderfully dramatic way both the question of whether or not Jesus had the power of God, and if so, what does that mean, and how is it to be used. 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, in ways they could not imagine! As we hear the second criminal acknowledge the kingship of Jesus we want to yell out a loud "Yessss!", because we know from his resurrection that that promise he made to that criminal was indeed fulfilled. We know that the promise of salvation was fulfilled for us on that same fateful day. I'm reminded of the comments of a colleague, who when asked by an enthusiastic and eager young Christian "when were you saved?" replied, "about 2,000 years ago, on a hill top".

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 vies with his resurrection for being 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. Now set that beside all the trinkets and glitz and trivia of this life (Grey Cup and Santa Claus parades included!) and tell me which one displays the true power of God in Christ. Now don't misunderstand me – I'm as big a football fan as anyone, and I enjoy a good parade as much as the next person, 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 to do so.

But there's more. Not only is there a divine irony in the mocking taunts of the soldiers and the leaders, there is a divine irony in the silence and the distance of the adoring crowd and the disciples. Silent at the moment of Jesus' sacrificial death, they soon became the voice that would proclaim his death and resurrection around the world. Moved by the overwhelming gift of grace and mercy the disciples and the crowd would meet and worship, would travel and talk, would spread the word of forgiveness to all who would listen, and rejoice in the new-found life of those who would respond. We know that irony as well, because we are benefactors of the silent crowd who found their voice three days after the terrible events on The Skull. We are indeed part of that crowd, hopefully not fallen silent again but with a voice that continues to proclaim the mercy and grace of the one who could, and did, with all authority and power promise, "today you will be with me in Paradise".

Hopefully it won't be today for you and for me. God willing we will have many more days to embrace the knowledge that we too are covered with Christ's action on the cross, to be reassured that we also have been accepted into his Kingdom, to proclaim to others that the same grace and mercy is right there for them to accept.

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.