

Good Samaritan, VB, VA
November 24th, 2019
Last Sunday after Pentecost/Christ the King (C)
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Luke 23:33-43

For almost the last 100 years we have been celebrating this last Sunday in the Christian year as the Sunday of Christ the King.¹ Yet, if this is the Sunday of Christ the King, why in the world are we did we just listen to Canon Roy Hoffman read the Gospel lesson for Good Friday? For goodness sake, if we're thinking about a king you'd think that we'd be hearing about ornate horse drawn carriages, a host of servants in waiting, a carefully designed throne on which the king would sit, and a jeweled crown upon the king's head.

Yet, we heard none of that today. Our king came into town not in a carriage but on the back of a donkey, was only served by hostile soldiers and corrupt politicians, was nailed to a cross instead of sitting upon a throne, and was given a plaited crown of thorns instead of a jeweled crown.

We just heard that Jesus was crucified at the Place of the Skull, If today you go to the location where Jesus is thought to have been crucified, you might just be led to think that you have arrived a place adorned with the trappings of a palace. Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem you can gain access to the rock on which the cross of Jesus is believed to have been placed. The rock is surrounded by smooth and polished marble with bright brass fittings. Today the Place of the Skull is the exact opposite of what it was when Jesus hung in agony. Today the Place of the Skull is the place fitting for the king's palace.

In Jesus' day death upon a cross was more than a means of execution; it was an act of terrorism. The idea was that all who passed by would and saw a crucifixion would become deeply afraid of what the occupying Roman government could do to them – should they step out of line.

Jesus was not just any king. Jesus was our king. Indeed, there was a coronation for Jesus kingship. This man was mockingly derided as the "King of the Jews" and crowned with a circle of thorny branches. Little did those who derided him know that

¹ Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925. ... The world was in bad shape after World War I ended. To come was more — World War II, Communism swallowing several countries, and today's extreme secularism ruling societies. Pius XI saw — and foresaw — the problems, but most importantly he knew and gave the solution to all these horrendous ills in his 1925 encyclical Quas Primus (On the Feast of Christ the King). ...Sounding up-to-the-minute, Pius XI noted when individuals and states rebel against Christ's authority, the results are "discord ... bitter enmities between nations ... insatiable greed ... unity and stability of the family undermined ... society in a word, shaken to its foundations and on the way to ruin." —Joseph Pronechen, "Christ the King is the answer to today's evils," National Catholic Register, November 25, 2018, ncregister.com.

Jesus was more than the King of all Jews; he was king and lord of every man and woman who would ever live. Jesus coronation came when he hung upon the cross and gave his life as a sacrifice for us and for all humankind. As Jesus suffers upon the cross he connects his suffering with our suffering. For all time his palace would be the loneliness of a barren hill known as Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. His humiliation would become our humiliation. His pain would become our pain. His poverty would become our poverty.

From time to time my fellow Christians have endeavored to remind me, sometimes righteously so, that we are people who live in and celebrate Easter each time we gather together to make and celebrate Holy Eucharist and receive the body and blood of Christ in holy bread and holy wine. While I do believe that we are Easter people, also I am that more so we live in the midst of a Good Friday world; a world that is inundated with hurt and pain and horror; a world in which too many good die young and too many of the old are surrounded by loneliness; a world which we are surrounded by wars and rumors of war; a world in which we have daily confrontations with cancer and other fatal diseases; a world, though created good and perfect, has been polluted seemingly beyond our control; a world of poverty prevalent wherever we seem to look.

Jesus knew this world, or should I say he knew “our world,” and yet, on the cross refused to give in to the meanness and arrogance surrounding him. However, through it all he was a person of spiritual character.

Some years ago I was serving as a US Navy chaplain on exchange with the British Royal Navy. During that time Queen Elizabeth made a once every ten years visit to our Navy establishments on the south coast of England to represent the Royal Navy colors to us. The day was dismal with a steady downpour of rain. While hundreds of us were huddled under tents that were set up for the garden party to follow the ceremony, the queen’s driver pulled up in her black Bentley and stopped in the middle of the parade field. As if it was a sunny day in mid-July, Queen Elizabeth alighted from her car, and wearing neither a raincoat nor carrying an umbrella, walked the 150 to 200 yards across the parade field to greet us. My goodness we all exclaimed. The queen was getting soaked. Yet we forgot all about the rain when she came over to us to personally greet as many persons as possible. The message was clear. No amount of rain was going to hinder the queen from performing her duty to greet us. That was an act of character which I shall never forget.

As Jesus experienced the cruelest manner of death that was conceivable, his character, the spiritual character of a passionate leader, was very much present. In the face of evil and despair, Jesus actions – or should we say lack of action – told us who he was. To the cries for blood from the crowd, he did not respond. To the clubs and whips that beat him, he refused to fight back. To the soldiers who would tear his body to shreds, he offered forgiveness. To the thief, he whispered the hope of eternity.

On the cross the passion of Jesus' suffering is surpassed only by one thing: the passion of his love. Jesus' death upon the cross, his coronation, revealed for all time that God's love is stronger and greater than any cruelty that world could dish out. For that reason, brothers and sisters we celebrate Jesus kingship today.

Have you been there? Have you been surrounded by a world eclipsed by meanness and arrogance? On the cross God becomes eternally aligned with the lonely, the sick, the poor, the hurting, the brokenhearted—with all of us.

Are you as impressed as I am that in the midst of this arrogant cruelty Jesus had the grace to ask his God and Father to "...forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing?"² But who are the "thems" for whom he is seeking the Father's forgiveness?

Did "them" include a man named Pilate who knew the right thing to do, but was swayed by the results of a 1st century opinion poll to which he acquiesced and in an act of political expediency sent an innocent man to die?

Did "them" include the crucifiers, those who actually carried out the mechanics of this cruel execution, who may have hid behind the excuse that they are "just following orders"?

Did "them" include the chief priests and the other temple authorities who led the demand for Jesus' crucifixion, those whose position and prestige were dependent on keeping the religious life just as it was, and who saw in Jesus a threat to their status quo?

Did "them" include the people who got carried along by a mob mentality, shouting things they might not have shouted on their own, but who, in following the crowd, said things for which they were eternally sorry?

The answer is yes, yes, yes, and yes. No amount of cruelty or sin could or can overcome God's grace. It is as we sing in that old and favorite hymn, "There's a wide ness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea."³

Though at times we do live in the darkness of a Good Friday world, also there are the blinding flashes of God's mercy. The mercy is the light of the kindness and love that we can show to one another. This bright light of the God is the evidence that there is something of God's kingdom emerging in the midst of darkness. This is the kingdom of God's love.

What does this kingdom – a kingdom of love – look like?

Years ago I had been discharged from my initial enlistment in the Navy. While spending a lot of energy keeping the secret that I was a Vietnam combat veteran – because we

² Luke 23:34, NRSV.

³ <https://www.riteseries.org/song/Hymnal1982/661/>. Accessed 11/23/2019.

weren't too popular back then – many of us were unemployed. After three months of job applications I was fortunate enough to get a factory job with a major manufacturing company.

For almost a year I worked on second shift. Working with me on my shift there was a group of men about my age who during the day were students at a local Bible college. Though by all outward appearances I was doing well, inside my life was a mess. Though I had been raised in a Christian congregation of this church, long ago I had abandoned anything that resembled a life of faith. It might not be surprising to you that I kept my distance from these Bible college students.

Yet, one of them was different. His name was Jack. Jack never seemed to be obsessed with giving me gospel tracts and asking me if I was saved. Unlike the others Jack never tried to impress me with their belief about how hot the flames of hell were; flames that ultimately they believed I would experience.

Every evening at the last break of the evening, Jack and I would sit together to have a cup of coffee. Over a period of three months, five nights a week, Jack and I would talk. At first it was about my life. Outside of members of my own family Jack was the first to acknowledge the dark shadows I had within me from Vietnam. Looking back, I can see that Jack knew that I had needs. Gradually and very gently he began to introduce me to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Jack told me the story we just heard read about Jesus upon the cross. Yet, his telling of the story always ended up on the third day with an empty tomb and a resurrected Jesus. Jack told me that he believed, more than anything else that Jesus suffered cruelty for us because of his love for us. Near the end of that three month period of time I remember telling Jack that I wanted to acknowledge that Jesus did in fact love me. There were no jubilant hallelujahs or shouts of "praise God." As I recall Jack's response to my affirmation was that he had been praying for me every day and hoped that I could accept God's patient, kind and passionate love.

To know the love of Jesus is to be a part of God's kingdom. Brothers and sisters, this is not a kingdom that will only come in the distant future. God's kingdom is now and today.

Today we are going to mark Christ's kingship in our life and our participation in God's kingdom through the renewal of our baptismal vows. In renewing those vows you and I will affirm that God is with us; with each of us and all of us. God is with us in our living and in our dying. God is with us in our pain and in our joy. God is with us in our goodness and in our sinfulness. Indeed, our God is even close by us when we try to distance ourselves from God.

Many years ago I learned a cliché of a statement that went something like this: Love is the flag that flies from the heart when the king of kings is in residence there. Are you ready to hoist that flag?