

The Reverend Canon Emmanuel Mercer

### **Christ the King**

Several weeks ago, the Egyptians for the first time in eighty-five years revealed the face of the young king Tut who died over three thousand years ago. His body is now in a climate controlled glass case, and all those who want to see the young king, would have to buy a ticket in order to see him.

This development raises an interesting question, did those who first buried the young king ever thought that three thousand years down the road, their beloved king will be a big commercial item?

I dare say that none of them ever thought that such an event will ever happen. They only performed their duty to their king by giving him a descent burial, and if there was ever a life beyond the visible, tangible, present life, their hope was to be unite with him in that life.

None of us can tell or describe the pain of these ancient Egyptians, nor can we find the appropriate words to describe the pain of the women who were so loyal to their teacher that they stood afar and maintained eye contact with him as he hang on the cross. We can however tell from our individual experience with death, that losing a loved one through Alzheimers, or diabetes, or cancer or through any kind of illness or accident, that death is a painful experience. And if we had our own way, we would either live forever or completely eradicate death out of human experience.

Oftentimes our hatred of death is so deep and intense that for some of us, death looks more like the end of all things then the beginning of something new. Our distaste for death is so strong that for some of us, death marks the highest point of betrayal. Human animosity towards death is such that the mere sight of the cross is enough to send shivers down the spine.

It was the feeling of betrayal, mistrust, hopelessness and utter foolishness that the friends of Jesus associated with their relationship with the person who was now hanging on the cross. For these friends, the cross as they knew it, marked the end of everything that they had worked for. The cross represented for them another fruitless attempt at restoring the kingdom of David. After leaving their individual occupations for almost three years, they felt betrayed by this fella, and justifiably so.

Feeling so betrayed, what would have been the point in following him to Golgotha? After all, the finality of life is death and the cross represented death. But those who in spite of this feeling still followed him to Golgotha probably did so out of curiosity or their personal affection for him and not because of his perceived failure to inaugurate the kingdom of God that he so much talked about. And when they asked for his body to bury him, just like the ancient Egyptians who buried king Tut without the slightest inclination that their beloved king will turn out to be a commercial piece, these women and friends of Jesus did not also know that three days down the road, his tomb will be too small to accommodate him.

There is a poem by an Anglican Divine John Donne. The title of the poem is “Death be not Proud.” “Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so; For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow, Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow, And soonest our best men with thee do go, Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery. Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell, And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well. And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then? One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

I am pretty sure that most of you have read that poem. In this poem, Donne pulls down and tears apart all we know about death and purposefully overthrows the human fear of death by predicting the death of death itself. For Donne to suggest the death of death itself, Donne clearly understood the point about the redemption of the human race, for the person who succumbed to death on the cross is the same person who by his resurrection has overcome death. And so if death will die, it will die because the promised kingdom of God of which Christ is the King and in which those who believe and dwell therein shall never die has been set in motion.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was about to be taken to the gallows, he reportedly told his fellow prison inmates, “This is the end, for me the beginning of life.” This to me is one of the biggest paradoxes of Christian faith. How can a life which is about to end also mark a beginning of a new life?

The reality is, both Donne and Bonhoeffer appreciated the fact that the validity and importance of their faith depended on the resurrection of the dead Christ.

For the starting point of Christian hope is the resurrection of Christ. By his death on the cross, Christ was no longer among the living, and by his resurrection, Christ was no longer with the dead. Christ by his resurrection offers a new life and a new world in which sin, hell and death are overcome.

If Christ is king, he is king not only because of the cross but because the tomb was too small to contain him. And if Jesus is alive, then we are also alive, and if we are alive, then not even death will be enough to separate us from the love of God. And because

Jesus is present with us, the kingdom of God is alive and present whether Clemson wins or Carolina loses.

The sad reality of today's gospel is, because the life of Jesus and especially the passion did not fit into the acceptable pattern of the coming kingdom, those who walked with Jesus around Palestine, shared table fellowship with him and heard him talk about the kingdom did not even know that the kingdom was in motion, neither did the clerical elite who were supposed to be the repository of Israel's ancient wisdom. It was rather a thief, a convicted criminal who noticed the new emerging reality.

The embedded hope is that not only does the tombs we create for Jesus too small to hold him, but he towers over all human particularities and patterns, and that the kingdom of God in which he reigns is available to all who recognize their need for it and seek it.  
Amen.