

Luke 23 : 33-43

In our reading from the gospel of Jesus Christ, as written by Luke, Jesus, is proclaimed king. When we picture a coronation, we generally picture a golden crown, roaring crowds, royal robes, and a powerful throne. But in this passage from the gospel we meet with a very different king, who seems powerless , with a crown of thorns and with a throne constructed of a simple wooden cross. In this passage, true leadership is seen through self sacrificing love.

Two criminals are crucified at the side of the Son of God. They are crucified at the place of the skull, Golgotha. A place not only of crucifixion but also a refuge dump of human decay. The horrific scene fulfills the prophet Isaiah's words in chapter 53 when he wrote, "he was numbered with the transgressors". Initially, the cross looks like a place of total loss, a place of defeat of horror and shame . Jesus may seem to be totally powerless, but in reality, the cross is the throne of the true king. The cross is no accident. It is the salvation of humankind. It may appear to some that it provides a moment of ultimate painful injustice as the nails are driven in, but this is far from the case.

From the desperation and agony of the cross, when we would probably be cursing in anger and pain, Jesus prays for his killers. He prays "father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". If the king can forgive from that horrendous cross, we can surely forgive from our hurts.

One of the criminals insults Jesus, “if you are the king of the Jews, save yourself” the paradox here is that Jesus did save others, precisely, because he did not save himself. Everything said here is ironically true, he is the king of the Jews. He could save himself, but he chose to save us.

The other criminal often called The Penitent thief then rebuked the other thief. He said to him “don’t you fear, God, we are punished justly, but this man has done nothing wrong” then he turned to Jesus and said “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”

Here is a man crucified by Rome, who sees a king on a cross painfully next to him, and recognizes his own guilt and Jesus’ innocence and kingship. This is an example of pure faith of clear trust and obeying. Absolute obedience.

Then comes one of the most beautiful promises of the Bible, I quote.” Truly, I tell you today you will be with me in paradise” . The penitent thief has had no chance to fix his life or make amends. He simply trusts and obeys .Grace is not earned, it is received through faith alone. Read some of John Wesley’s sermons about this.

Jesus was put to death for being a king, that is what was written by the side of the Cross. ‘The king of the Jews,’ but his kingship is radically different, it departs from inequality, injustice, competition, corruption and privilege. Jesus calls us to live as people who love one another, people who are prepared to share and care about one another, about community about society, and to be compassionately

loving, Jesus cared for all, but especially the outcast and the sinners.

On the cross Jesus re-defined all notions of justice, by embracing the grief and the pain of all humanity. The whole of humankind is embraced on the cross, and the cross invites us to look to Christ the King, to bring everything together, together, justly, compassionately gracefully and lovingly.

Crucifixion an act of human foolishness, becomes a witness to God's grace.

The penitent thief provides a clear example of salvation. Through faith alone. He has nothing good about him, only guilt and a simple request of remembrance. The response of Jesus is not with any requirement whatsoever, but with a total, absolute guarantee of eternal life.

The gospel of Luke presents us with two very different responses to the crucified Christ. Firstly, we could mock or scoff with a theology of selfish preservation and worldly power like the first criminal, who did just that. Or we can see ourselves as we truly are as the second criminal did, and we like the criminal can say to Jesus "remember me when you come into your kingdom"

If Grace is available to a dying criminal, it is surely available to each and every one of us who is prepared to trust and obey. You see, the throne of the cross is a throne of grace, and the one who hung on the cross says to us all "today you will be with me in paradise'."

It is at Calvary that Jesus embraces true kingship as he wears the Crown of Thorns, as His hands are stretched out in mercy. The world may seem defeated, but heaven is victorious for via the cross, sin, death and hell are conquered.

We like the penitent thief should see that the Grace of God is available to all. We should recognise His forgiveness and sincerely demonstrate His eternal loving mercy.

To conquer hardened hearts with words-this is a daunting task.

Temptation whispered: "seize a crown, an army in your grasp."

But earthly kingdoms rise and fall, corruption takes its toll. Instead you chose a crown of thorns, your mount, a donkey's foal.

And still today temptation taunts; how well we know it's voice!

We know the path we ought to take, but fail to make the choice,

You placed your kingdom in our hands-new challenges each day-

and your compassion joins us here, for you have passed this way.

Jacque B. Jones (b. 1950, USA)

Amen

