

The Last Sunday after Pentecost – Christ the King Sunday. November 24, 2013
Luke's version of the crucifixion. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Every three years – when we get this Gospel reading on the Sunday we call “Christ the King”. It marks the conclusion of one annual cycle – the last Sunday of the Christian “year”. We get it because when things end is a good time to reflect on what’s gone before and, perhaps, to put an exclamation mark of understanding at the conclusion of the chapter.

One of the things this day does is remind us of the inherent contradiction at the heart of our faith – that the throne of God is a wooden instrument of execution not an exalted and majestic chair to be occupied only by a merit-less person who is an elite of one above an elite of few; a person who, throughout history has been given enormous power simply by an accident of birth or as the result of military conquest.

If Jesus is a king, then it’s not that sort of king – though centuries of believers have made the mistake of thinking that he IS that sort of king, and millions have suffered as a result.

So what sort of king? What’s this day about? It’s about a kingdom unlike any proclaimed in the history of our world, no matter how generous any other king or kingdom has been or is, because Christ’s kingdom isn’t predicated on power and privilege and social class, nor the control the destiny of the many by the few or the one.

Rather Christ’s kingdom’s a place where compassion in relationship rules, where selfless community is more important than individual selfishness, and where everyone is included no matter who they are or what they have done.

Everyone. It’s worth stopping for a moment and simply reflecting that “everyone” means “everyone” – not just those we like or respect or love.

All of today’s readings draw us to this different understanding of “kingdom”, a vision that rejects the ideology of empire in favor of what one theologian describes as “a vision that reverses the roles usually assigned to royalty and servitude.

In accepting crucifixion “Jesus refuses to be the master of the world, the mighty monarch, the spiller of blood. His reign subverts our notion of kingship, it subverts our understanding of empire, confronts the way strong nations exercise power against weak ones, denies the right of the mighty and raises up the lowly to become equal partners in a shared human enterprise that places hope above fear, compassion above rigid righteousness, reconciliation above revenge, and love above all.” (John Kavanaugh S.J.)

Now that’s a revolution, folks – a revolution of love and grace.

And so this day, when we celebrate Christ as King, we’re invited, first, to focus on the realities of the present time and space, to proclaim that we Christians have something to say about the here-and-now, a counter-vision of a life poured out in compassion even in the midst of the cruelty and corruption and selfishness of our world. A counter proclamation of our willingness to join with that life poured out for creation, and let it transform us, and through us transform our world.

So it is that here, Jesus, from his ‘throne’, talks about the future, about how we who now live as people of faith will be honored in the same way we have honored our ancestors. It’s a vision of a future that will always be just beyond us while we live in the here-and-now, a vision of hope and joy, a vision of celebration and of community, a vision of embrace and forgiveness – a vision, as Jesus puts it, of “Paradise”.

It’s because of who Jesus is that his words take on this deeper meaning. What could look

like a fools promise – the last empty hope of The Executed Man – takes on a much more profound significance because of the identity of the speaker.

So as this particular Christian cycle draws to a close it's a good time to remember what this life of ours is all about, as people of faith: about now and about then; about love and not hate, about grace and not self-interest, about the gifts of God for all of God's people.

I'm always struck by how this vision is given to us – by happy coincidence – right up against our celebration of Thanksgiving. That first Thanksgiving, remember, was one where starving and dying people – the colonists – were given new life by those who had most to lose (and who did lose most) by their presence: the native Americans who had long been here before us later immigrants.

As we focus this week on Thanksgiving I believe that the Reign of Christ – Christ the King – God's kingdom – should be one of the things we hold most centrally, and I invite you, as you pray over your meal on Thursday, to do just that: to thank God for the gift of Christ's kingdom, and the potential for so many wonderful things – many yet to be realized – that it promises.

Happy thanksgiving; Happy reign of Christ!