

Christ The King Sunday Year C

Isn't it jarring that, amidst all the prayers, music and readings today celebrating Christ as our King, our gospel lesson instead took us to a very different place? "When they came to the place that is called the skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals."

On this most triumphant of Sundays Christ is astonishingly presented to us as the failed insurgent rather than as our victorious King.

Taken at face value it appears contradictory, but in fact it is sublime irony. Let us not forget that, at the conclusion of Jesus' trial, his accusers made a joke of his "kingship," they put an elegant robe on him, jammed a crown of thorns on his head, and as he hung on the cross the inscription read: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

In other words, the gospels present Jesus' crucifixion as a mock coronation, not realizing that God would use it as a real coronation. Christ is our King because as he hung on that cross he did two things for us that we could not do for ourselves: He gave us the greatest gift and he made the greatest promise.

First the gift, what would you say is the number one shortcoming; the greatest sin if you will, of humanity? I would describe it as humanity's rejection of God by our insistence on doing things our own way, ourselves. The crucifixion of Jesus is the most graphic image of this rejection of God because in this tragedy God's own Son is rejected. And bear in mind that those who insisted on his death had convinced themselves that they were doing a public service. "It is better for one man to die" they reasoned, "than for the entire nation to suffer."

So as Jesus hung on the cross with the full weight of humanity's rejection of God upon him, he gave the greatest gift by uttering the truest words every spoken. He said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Never a truer word was uttered; and for that reason and for the love that God has for all his children, we are forgiven. The great and the small sins. Every wrong we've ever done: we are forgiven.

Second, the promise. Having asked the Father to forgive us all, Jesus then turned his attention more narrowly to the criminals on his right and left, and these criminals reflect the division of opinion about this King Jesus. The first joined in with the mocking. The second criminal shouted down the first, contrasting the innocence of Jesus with their own guilt. The second criminal then looked at Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," in response to which Jesus gave the greatest promise ever: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The promise of life extending into eternity, and for a people surrounded by deserts, the language of Paradise was the language of Oasis in the desert, where trees and water and green grass replace the parched dryness. Today you will pass through this wilderness and come to my oasis. "Today you will be with me in paradise."

And that is why Jesus is our King. Because God took the cruelty of a mock Roman coronation and from his cruciform throne Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of our sins and offered the promise of eternal life.

That is why we celebrate this day, and that is why he is our King. Amen.