

The Feast of Christ the King
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
21 November 2021

John 18: 33-37

As I watch the news and read various blogs, I am astonished at the amount of death and violence around the globe. From insurrections in Africa to bloody protests over Covid-19 restrictions in Europe. And from growing violence and street crime in Latin America to race protests in America. From the cries of environmental activists to the cries anti and pro-immigration at American borders and borders of industrialized nations around the globe. As the days are getting darker and Fall anticipates Winter, there seems to be another type of menacing darkness advancing around the globe. It is the darkness abuse, violence, racism, and poverty. It is the cries of the disposed and the forgotten. It is the cries of those subjected to abuse because the color of their skin or their faith tradition. It is the cries of those who are killed every day in the name of religion. It is the darkness of those who ridicule, abuse, and kill the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the darkness of those who are so filled with hatred that they will go to any extent to destroy anyone who is not like them, does not dress like them, does not think like them, or does not behave like them.

And as the days are getting darker in America, I find myself thinking that we need a better way. There has to be a better way for this world to go forward. We are imploding from within and the "center cannot hold." We need a leader to unite us and lead us the rest of the way home. Today, as we celebrate Christ as King, I cannot avoid thinking of the stark contrast between this Jesus who faces Pilate today in the Gospel of John and other kings, queens, and rulers of this world. He is the king born of a humble virgin in a humble manger. He is the king who was one of us, working an everyday job and spending his life with average folks, many of them poor, isolated, oppressed, and sinful. Jesus is a king who did not travel in luxury, did not enjoy the respect of the mighty and powerful, did not rub elbows with the movers and shakers of the world, and was not vested with the outward signs of royalty. He is the king that was crowned with a crown of thorns hours before he was killed and not with the bejeweled crowns of other kings. He was spat on, ridiculed, mocked, beaten, and crucified, and yet it is at this point of trial and death on the cross that his kingship is most clearly and powerfully affirmed.

Pilate ridicules him and asks him if he is the "King of the Jews." At best, this miserable man is only good for a few minutes of entertainment. Pilate knows he is a nobody, likely an innocent peasant caught in the net of the capricious Jewish authorities. Yet even though he knows Jesus is innocent, Pilate doesn't care enough to save him. He asks Jesus, "What have you done?" Jesus remains silent. This is the wrong question. Jesus is not on trial because of something he has done. He is on trial because of who he is. He is the rejected stone; he is the inconvenient fulfillment of a promise the Jews expected to be fulfilled in a very different way. He is a King without armor, a warrior

without weapons, a Savior without an army, a King whose kingdom is not from here. He is gentle, he is kind, he preaches love, and he is on the side of the poor. To the Jews he must be an impostor, to Pilate he is at best a deluded man, to the crowds he is a bit of a distraction to break the routine of their miserable lives. A bit of show to help them forget how desperate their lives have truly become. Watching Jesus die is cheap entertainment. Who cares anyway? Nobody really believes him to be King!

They all want Jesus to prove that he truly is the King who was to come. And they want him to prove this by walking down from his cross, triumphantly, victoriously, unharmed, and undisturbed. They all want a mighty King who shows his strength through supernatural powers. If Jesus is who he said he is, he must reject this cross, he must vindicate his honor, he must affirm his righteousness, he must shame his oppressors, he must shake people free of their unbelief by supernatural means. If he is the King who was to come, he must reveal his true nature by conquering his enemies, punishing his oppressors, and by restoring the fortunes of Israel. He must be more powerful than David! This one dying on the cross cannot be the awaited King. He must be an impostor!

Yet, this ridiculed Messiah was the answer to the problem then and he remains the answer to the problem today. Christ came to build a bridge to God himself and he died to show us the way out of hatred and desperation, out of intolerance and misguided religiosity, out of empty ritual and dehumanizing dogmatism, out of any feelings of superiority that makes us feel better and more righteous than others, out of selfishness and arrogance, out of desperation and powerlessness. He came to rescue captive Israel and he, even today, continues to rescue captive America, captive Europe, captive Africa, and a captive world. He came to save us from ourselves and to show us that death is not the end of the story, that suffering has a purpose only God sees, that God himself weeps when we destroy his perfect creation and treat others with the type of inhumanity, we have seen around the world these last few weeks. God weeps for those slaughtered in the name of religion, those who suffer violence and oppression, and those who struggle to cope with so much hatred.

Martin Luther once said, “He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering... God can be found only in suffering and the cross... It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.” (Quoted in Stoffregen in www.Crossmarks.com.) It is at moments when we are deflated and destroyed by suffering that we see God most powerfully in our lives. The thief at the cross is able to see Christ for who he is at a time when others have abandoned him, when he is the most despised, when there are few traces of his divinity and all that can be seen is his dying humanity. The thief’s acknowledgment of Christ’s kingship came before the resurrection. It did not come at a time when Christ was healing the sick, multiplying the bread, walking on water, or raising Lazarus from the dead. It rather came at a time when both sinner and Redeemer lay dying on a cross.

Today we celebrate the feast of a King who came to earth to die a criminal's death to show us a better way. Martyrdom is in the very DNA of our faith. But I must confess that I have a paternity complex. There are times when I wish for a strong father-figure to govern the world and force all violence to stop. There are times when I want God's intervention to be direct, commanding, and immediate. There are times when I want God to fix what's broken, here and now. I want Christ the King to come down from heaven, form a ruling council, and take over our world. But of course, King Jesus works very differently. He works through us, imperfect human beings. It is our duty to care for his creation and his people. It is his disciples who are given the commission to care for others and to govern in a way that gives God the honor and glory that are rightly his.

My friends, there are times I want Christ's divinity without his cross. I want Resurrection Sunday without Passion Friday. There are times I even want the escapism fantasies of the Prosperity Gospel. But we must not forget that there is no salvation without the cross and no resurrection without Christ's death. In many ways we too try to avoid the cross and suffering of Christ by all means necessary. It is easier for us to see God when things are good, and life makes sense. As long as Jesus is multiplying bread in our lives, we are comfortable and willing to accept his claim to kingship. But we must be like the repentant thief and accept Christ's kingship even in our suffering and pain. We must allow him to reign in our lives. To be in Christ's kingdom is to place our lives willingly and faithfully under his rule, to abandon our lives to his mercy, and to beg for his pardon and grace always, in moments of victory and in moments of anguish and suffering. To be in Christ's kingdom means to become engaged in the world's affairs in his name and to work for a more just and equitable world.

Today I invite you to pray for those who suffer around the world. Christ is with us. He sees our pain and one day he will rule supreme. Hatred is only here for a season, our King is on the move, and he brings justice and peace with him. Let us wait for him in joy. And let us work together to bring peace to our world. Our salvation is at hand, we just need to wait a little longer! Our victory approaches! Our King is on his way. Amen!