

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Episcopal Church 11.20.16
Luke 23:33-43
Christ the King Sunday

God Save Our King

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It marks the conclusion of the Church's liturgical year and prepares us for the Season of Advent which begins next Sunday. If Advent is about waiting and looking and hoping for the re-birth of our Messiah-King, then Christ the King Sunday is about finding the spiritual lens that will help us recognize Him in the midst of many contenders.

In this post-election chaos issues of power—who had it, who has it, and who will have it in the future—could not be more relevant as we attempt to navigate turbulent waters as Christians who claim ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Lord of Lords, and King of Kings.

Today's gospel lesson depicting the crucifixion gives us a powerful and countercultural image of the King to whom we have given our loyalty. Rather than a majestic and glorious King—sitting on his throne high in heaven—we see a naked, humiliated, and beaten Jesus who is surrounded by a largely hostile crowd.

Next to him are two so-called criminals—one on his right and one on his left. Jesus is not sitting on a golden throne but is hanging on a rough blood stained cross between two suspicious characters.

Frequently the two criminals in the story often get neglected in sermons so I would like to say a few words. A better translation from the Greek for criminals would be “revolutionaries or those who protest.” The nuance is very important.

I believe few of us in this room would say that Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent marches for racial equality made him a criminal and yet many through history have said just that. I wonder how many other criminals are God's anointed prophets?

In this case it is possible that these two so-called criminals in this gospel story may both have something much more in common with Jesus than we might think. The Roman Empire, not the Jewish people, has labeled all three of these men as enemies of the state and revolutionaries, therefore deserving of capital punishment, denial of all human rights, and horrible humiliation.

The sociologist Harold Garfinkel was one of the first to study “social degradation rituals and behaviors” back in the 1950s. He noticed that nearly all communities and social groups—even churches—have some way they remove social status from perpetrators of behavior deemed outside the norm of accepted conduct, even if the abnormal behavior is virtuous, altruistic, or motivated by a high principle such as love.

He discovered these degradation rituals or micro-aggressions in all areas of our lives—from prisoners who are stripped of their clothes, to high schoolers who destroy a young woman’s reputation by spreading lies on social media, to soldiers who are court-marshaled and publically humiliated by the removal of their strips and medals.

There are so many things that terrify me regarding the kingdoms of this world and their ways. One of the most terrifying is the increased use of degradation behaviors and rituals that make it make unsafe for all of us and threaten our ability to rise above our fears to live into our baptismal covenant with God and each other, “to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity and worth of every human being.”

Everywhere I look I see the temptation to degrade and dehumanize so as to get power over someone else or some other group. Last week several Muslim women at the University of Washington Bothell Campus were accosted by a group of men who demanded that they remove their hijabs, their traditional head scarfs. The women now live in fear and believe themselves to be victims of hate crimes.

An African American senior, at the University of Washington after hearing the University president encourage the campus to come together in unity feels, angry believing that to counter racism with love is an attempt to pacify those who are oppressed.

At West Seattle High School, 200 students stage a non-violent walkout to express their fear and anger triggered by the increase in violence towards minority groups across the nation. They returned to school to speak with their principal who compassionately responded to them by saying, “You are the leaders of tomorrow. How do we go about doing the right work and building a better tomorrow?”

As Christians we all need to continue to address this question. Who is the king that we are to serve and what rules of the kingdom are we to follow and which rules are we to change or break because the new kingdom of Christ and our God-given consciences require us to do so.

Historically Christianity has responded in one of three different ways to the issue of faith and kingdom. We can retreat and try to form our own society within society, we can baptize the status quo and risk complete assimilation into the dominate kingdom paradigm, or we can try to reform and transform the culture in which we live.

I believe whole-heartedly in the latter. That if we are truly to follow Christ as our king and bring about a new world order we need to be willing to find a path of enduring and persevering love that is prepared to sacrifice everything to non-violently bring about God’s kingdom of justice and peace in the world.

In other words, we need to play by King Jesus' rules whose only sword is that of the sword of truth—a sword that doesn't degrade or take human life but is a sword that cuts through lies, rationalizations and justifications for violence and oppression.

In a breathtakingly beautiful and still relevant sermon entitled "Loving Your Enemies" the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "the strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil...and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love.

Dr. King went on to say, "...when you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love."

A powerful historical example of this being played out in the political arena is when President Lincoln appointed Edwin Stanton to be Secretary of War after Stanton, while running against Lincoln for president, said many horrible and demeaning things about Lincoln. Stanton was quoted as saying this about Lincoln, "You don't want a tall, lanky, ignorant man like this as president of the United States."

President Lincoln, a few months later, was assassinated. The grieving Stanton was then quoted as saying, "Now he belongs to the ages." He went on to say if Lincoln had not forgiven him they would have both gone to their graves with hatred.

But through the power of God, both found healing and transformation. This same kind of power was present when Jesus forgave the criminal at the Cross.

We as a nation are standing in the midst of great turmoil, violence, and unrest. I hardly recognize America anymore. We are now seeing and witnessing widespread degradation of human beings and the justification of violence and hatred similar to the kind that led to the crucifixion of Jesus. I do not believe I am exaggerating.

We are a nation needing to see, now more ever, that there is another way and a better way. We need to stand up, speak up and reveal the ways of Jesus, our King who is bringing forth a new kingdom here on earth. May God save us and our King! Amen.