

9am Wesley - Christ the King Sunday – 20th November 2016

Theme: 'Christ the King'

Reading: Luke 23:33-43 'Jesus, the crucified 'King of the Jews'.

Text: "Then one of the criminals said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" Luke 23:42-43

Introduction

It seems a little bizarre that so close to Christmas we revert to the account of Jesus hanging on the cross, flanked by two criminals. What appears even more bizarre is that on Christ the King Sunday we have this account as our main reading. Shouldn't we be celebrating Jesus' amazing exploits, healings and teachings that made him central to the Christian faith on this last Sunday in the Christian year? In a sense, revealing all the characteristics that show power, pomp and victory. Yet in our Lectionary readings and particularly here in the Gospel for the day, the text makes it clear to us that something quite different is at work. Here we find some-one who is deeply humiliated. We see here a man who has to suffer injustice that harms him. What is revealed in this text is miserable, deeply moving, even shocking. We would prefer to hide our face as we watch someone who is truly honourable tortured, and we can do nothing for him to relieve his suffering. We read of the derogatory remarks of the people:

"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."

Also the derision of the soldiers:

"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

Even one of the criminals hanging with him insults him saying:

"Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself."

These last moments of Jesus' life all seem to be in contrast to what is valued as great in our world. The world, in its glory is portrayed to us through the media and it says that the wealthy, the powerful, the beautiful, the successful, are the influential ones, the ones to be emulated and the ones to be followed. The pressure of this ideal is like an infection that overtakes us as we strive for it. In this world, the slogan is "Help yourself" and with this slogan you may survive.

Yet our scripture for today takes us by the hand and gives us surprising news: Christ is the highest and yet he has to suffer awfully. Both aspects fit together in the event of the Saviour. The Lord above all lords is exactly the same one who was humbled on the cross; no other is Lord. Conversely, this man who is beaten and driven into death has more power than those who sit in positions of authority and who have forced so many people down. That this Lord is hanging helpless on the cross does not stand in contrast to our confession of faith when we say;

"Yours is the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen"

This is the difference of the Christian faith to the way of the world – Christ calls us to serve and this may well be a path of humiliation as well. Not something we are comfortable with in our society and for many of us as high achievers within our community, we find this thought a little abhorrent.

The conversations on the cross

I find it amazing that we have recorded these conversations between the criminals crucified with Jesus and Jesus himself. On the one hand, one criminal abuses Jesus and adds to the insults and humiliation directed at him. On the other hand we have this other criminal who rebukes the abuse of his fellow miscreant and follows that up initially with a speech at his fellow criminal and then asks Jesus:

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Here, on the cross, we also have the differing opinions of Jesus reflected in the conversations. From the perspective of Luke's Gospel, the second criminal's rebuke of the first criminal enacts Jesus' directive:

"If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender." Luke 17:3

The second criminal then, exhibits attributes of a disciple when he rebukes the first one, telling him that they are getting what they deserve for their deeds, while Jesus has done nothing wrong.

He then goes on to ask Jesus:

"Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus' response is a little curious:

"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

The word 'paradise' is a Persian term for a king's hunting ground, adopted by Jews and Christians for the eternal, heavenly garden of Eden. A place of beauty, relaxation and care by and of God. Also the word 'today' does not have our literal meaning of sometime in the next 24 hours. Rather, 'today' refers to the day of messianic salvation inaugurated by Jesus. For Luke, Jesus' coming inaugurates a special day of salvation that continues forever. Jesus spent his whole ministry teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God. One of Jesus' last forgiving acts on earth was to proclaim that a repentant sinner would be with him in heaven. In a sense this was the culmination of his earthly ministry.

Relating the text

I was amazed to read the testimony of the great Russian writer Tolstoy and how he compares his conversion to that of the thief on the cross. He writes in '*A Confession and what I Believe*' – '*I, like the Thief*'. (trans. Aylmer Maude - Oxford University Press, 1921) "Five years ago I came to believe in Christ's teachings and my life suddenly changed; I ceased to desire what I had previously desired, and began to desire what I formerly did not want. What had previously seemed to me good seemed evil, and what had seemed evil seemed good. It happened to me as it happens to a man who goes out on some business and suddenly decides that the business is unnecessary and returns home. All that was on his right is now on his left, and all that was on his left is now on his right; his former wish to get as far as possible from home has changed into a wish to be as near as possible to it. The direction of my life and my desires became different, and good and evil changed places....."

I, like the thief on the cross, have believed Christ's teaching and have been saved. This is no far-fetched comparison, but the closest expression of the condition of spiritual despair and horror at the problem of life and death in which I formerly lived, and of the condition of peace and happiness in which I am now. I, like the thief, knew that I was unhappy and suffering. I, like the thief to the cross, was nailed by some force to a life of suffering and evil. And as, after the meaningless sufferings and evils of life, the thief awaited the terrible darkness of death, so did I await the same thing. In all this I was exactly like the thief, but the difference was that the thief was already dying, while I was still living. The thief might believe that his salvation lay there beyond the grave, but I could not be satisfied with that, because besides a life beyond the grave, life still awaited me here. And I did not understand that life. It seemed to me terrible. But suddenly I heard the words of Christ and understood them, and life and death ceased to seem evil, and instead of despair I experienced happiness and the joy of life undisturbed by death." Christ the King, brings hope to the hopeless, forgiveness to the desperate and new life to those who had ceased to believe.

Christ the King is the antithesis of worldly power, and turns our world upside down. Hence as we come towards Advent we say afresh, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." Amen.