

11.20.2022 Christ the King

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Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

“In him all things hold together”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ the King Sunday marks the end of the church year, and a new year begins next week on the First Sunday of Advent. The readings for Christ the King describe the cosmic Christ who is, as Paul writes, “*the image of the invisible God, who is before all things and in whom all things hold together.*” The prophet Jeremiah described Christ as the “*righteous Branch,*” who would reign as shepherd and king, executing justice and righteousness over the earth for all people. These powerful images of a Savior and King through whom all things have been created, who holds all things – even our lives – together with justice and righteousness have defined the church and continue to give Christians their identity across every language and culture.

St. Mark’s church building has two images of Christ the King – the marble *Christus Victor* on the front exterior wall and the statue of the ascended Christ above the high altar. With these two inspiring images drawing us into worship and community, it would not be surprising if this church had been named “Christ the King” Lutheran Church. Yet, how many of us also remember what is on the exterior rear wall directly behind the statue of the ascended Christ over the altar? Hidden in plain sight on the exterior rear wall of the church is a massive Jerusalem Cross in brick relief. It’s hard to know how intentional it was to place that cross on the “back” or “rear” of the church, but it is a very Lutheran gesture because Luther’s theology of the cross speaks of the invisible God revealed, hidden in the suffering of the cross. There is a marvelous symmetry to the structure of St. Mark’s church building, embodying a servant King revealed in the suffering of the cross.

Both the *Christus Victor* and the ascended Christ statue show Christ as the prophet, priest and king; while the cross announces Christ hidden in suffering. Without the cross, we would never understand the kingship of Christ who announced his reign of grace from the suffering of the cross. As Luther wrote, “God can be found only in suffering and the cross.”

Today’s gospel is the key to understanding Christ the King. Jesus is described as having been crucified between two criminals with an inscription placed over him reading, “*This is the King of the Jews.*” Instead of being worshiped and glorified, Christ had been beaten, stripped and mocked, “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*” The religious leaders and crowd seemed to get satisfaction in his suffering.

Jesus' kingship and kingdom are announced from the cross. This cross was not made of gold or silver, but of wood, perhaps the thick portion of a large branch. In Acts, Peter and the apostles used this image saying that Jesus had been killed by hanging him on a tree. In Jeremiah's image of a "righteous Branch," the cross itself becomes a life-giving tree, offering grace and hope to humanity as it faces suffering, adversity and death.

Luke tells us that only one of the criminals sought Jesus' help. He said to the other criminal who ridiculed Jesus, "*Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? We indeed have been condemned justly...but this man has done nothing wrong.*" This criminal witnessed to Jesus as the king who suffers with and for others, and Jesus responded by offering his kingdom and eternal life to the one who asked for his help.

The criminal who sought Jesus' help was also grasped the reality of his own cross, which was certain death and invisibility. Like so many who continue to die today in the confusion of war and injustice, he too would die, disappearing in an unmarked grave. A knowledge of our own finitude and mortality is part of what makes us human, and this criminal brought his humanity to Jesus.

Jesus' cross is not a piece of precious gold or silver artwork, yet offers something far more precious. Jesus' cross offers eternal life to a humanity grasped by a knowledge of our own death. Like the criminal, we also say, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" Like the criminal we also know that Jesus' kingship begins at the cross as we each carry our own cross of mortality. The cross defines Jesus as a king who suffers with us offering compassion and grace.

Jesus' reply says it all: "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" For early Christians, this was the reality of Jesus for whom they lived and died. There were as yet no marble *Christus Victor* statues on churches, nor any gold and jewel crosses. There was only the Christ who said from the cross, "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" Christ's life-giving cross continues to offer grace and hope to all who call upon him.

In our modern rush, we want to get to the end of the story. We want to see Christ in glory, in gold, silver, stained glass and marble. We are impatient with the process of the unfolding of a story and its nuances. We say, "Give it to me in soundbites." Yet we must also ask ourselves how the ascended Christ Jesus came into the glory of his kingdom. Jesus embraced the cross – he embraced its poverty, humility, obedience, rejection, and its suffering for others. The criminal was right, Jesus had been unjustly crucified so that he might justly share our sinful humanity. By his wounds humanity is healed and given hope across every language in which it calls out upon him.

On Christ the King Sunday, our temptation is to look to the power of Christ in glory. Our world of upward mobility seems to urge us to look for a Christ who is more powerful, magnificent and glorious than any other earthly ruler. Yet this is not the king revealed on the cross, as Paul writes, *“He is the image of the invisible God... in him all things hold together...Through him God was pleased to reconcile himself to all things...by making peace through the blood of the cross.”*

To modern people always aspiring to move upward for more, the “downward mobility” of God is striking. Because we cannot ascend to God, God stoops to our fallen humanity, experiencing poverty, rejection and suffering – all to welcome us into a kingdom filled with the riches we could never purchase for ourselves – grace, forgiveness, acceptance and healing. Against our upwardly mobile aspirations, it is only Christ’s downward mobility that gives us the things we cannot give to ourselves – forgiveness and eternal life. *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* Christ the King shows us that a life of downward mobility and service to others, is how we are to live in God’s kingdom each day.

Some years ago, I was a member of the Japan Ecumenical Association, a body of various church leaders that studied and served together. In preparation for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, we held gatherings where leaders of various Christian denominations spoke about Luther and the heritage of the Reformation. I remember the talk given by the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Tokyo. The bishop gave a textbook correct account of the Medieval church’s need for reform, and of Luther’s rediscovery of the gospel of justification by grace through faith. The bishop then shared a story of being a young priest in Rome in the early 1960s. He recounted being in St. Peter’s Basilica and seeing the Bishop of Rome carried into the sanctuary on an ornate gold chair. The Bishop of Tokyo said (and I paraphrase), “I decided then and there I would never aspire to being carried like that. I became a Christian to carry the cross in service to others because Jesus Christ humbled himself to carry the cross for me and for all people. Christ came to serve others, and calls us to serve others like him.”

On Christ the King Sunday, we give thanks for a King who is the image of the invisible God, whose downward mobility and love from the cross defines his kingdom and our service as a church.

“In him all things hold together” Call upon him. In him – live your life. He is the way to Paradise. Each day, may you also say, “Jesus, remember me in your kingdom.” Amen.