

Richmond Hill
 Richmond, Virginia
 22 November 2010
 Christ the King Sunday
 Luke 23:33-43
 The Rev. B. P. Campbell

Unwitting subjects of a forever king

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (*Luke 23:33-43*)

Tonight we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent.

Christ the King Sunday is itself a bit of a miracle. Apparently, the commemoration of the kingship of Christ on the last Sunday of the liturgical year dates from 1925, when it was proclaimed by Pope Pius XI. In his encyclical proclaiming the Commemoration Pius cited Cyril of Alexandria, who was bishop of that Egyptian city from 412-444. "Christ," Cyril said, "has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and nature." Pius was speaking to the growing power of Mussolini in Italy, and his comments were probably very much in tune with what the early Christians had meant in calling Jesus the Messiah.

The miracle of Christ the King Sunday is that, although it was invented by Pope Pius XI in a not very ecumenical century, it was adopted by the Church of England and by Lutherans, and in the last few years by a number of other Christian bodies, -- which may just go a little way toward proving what Cyril and Pius were saying -- that Jesus' kingship bypasses the power structures of this world.

Tonight's Gospel, then, is unusual in that it places a piece of the crucifixion story out of sequence in the teaching of the Christian year. But the passage speaks directly to Jesus' kingship, right here at the end of the church year. It is appropriate. Because at the end of the story, at the end of the year, at the end of the day, this is what we are left with.

This is the kingship of Christ. And tonight, preaching from this Gospel, I wish to make three points about our situation:

When it comes to kingship,

1. We don't know what we are doing.
2. We don't understand salvation
3. We are the unwitting subjects of a forever king.

1. We don't know what we are doing.

Here on the cross, Jesus uttered those powerful and wonderful words, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." They then went on to prove it, and we have been proving it ever since.

Thank you, Jesus, for those words. It is so clear that we don't know what we are doing when it comes to establishing justice, to punishing wrong, and to setting things right. Jesus was not killed by bad people only. He was killed by good people, or at least people who thought they were doing right by getting rid of someone who was causing trouble, upsetting civil authority, and spreading blasphemy among the people. He was also threatening to upset the very fragile balance of power which Jewish authorities had built with the occupying Roman empire. Jerusalem was a tinder box, ready to go up at any time, and Jesus was lighting a fire.

It was not crazy that he would be executed in that context. At least, it was not crazy according to the mores of the time.

But in retrospect, it helps us to see just how far from reality the people of Jerusalem had come. Their society had gotten to the point where it could call good evil and evil good, where the justice and righteousness of God were far from the consciousness of the people. Jesus sounded like a radical, rather than like a person teaching the simple truth of God and God's judgement. Killing him was simply an extreme form of not paying attention to him.

Here we have so many other ways of doing that. We can refuse to elect someone. We can make sure he doesn't get a job or a position of leadership. We can simply turn him or her off. We can simply not buy his book, not go to his church, not listen to his stuff on television. We have so many ways of preserving the lies by which we and our society live our lives that we don't really need crucifixion very often. In that way we are different, but in the way that we don't know what we are doing when it comes to the Righteous king of the world and the righteous king of the United States of America and the Righteous king of Virginia and of metropolitan Richmond, we are just the same as the people in Jesus' time.

We accept a level of injustice and a level of materialism, and a lack of community as normal which is immoral and destructive to all concerned. When, in the normal course of events, we crucify Jesus without even knowing it, he can say 100 times a day, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Never was a truer word spoken. I am so grateful that he, knowing what he knows, speaks it on my behalf. When it comes to kingship, we do not know what we are doing. And

2. We don't understand salvation.

The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

We know what they mean by saying "let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God." They are talking about not getting killed, about saving his life. But what did they mean, "He saved others?" We don't have many stories in the New Testament of Jesus saving people from death, and we don't have any stories about his saving someone from being executed. There are a couple of possibilities here. One is that we don't have the stories, but they happened. But the other is that the word "saved" means two things – and that is what I suggest is going on here.

The linguistic roots of the word translated "saved" in English mean "healed," more often than they mean "rescued." The stories we have of Jesus rescuing people primarily have to do with rescuing people from various forms of spiritual or physical or sociological or economic illness – that is rescuing them from inner darkness, from the hell of human life. They find spiritual healing with and through him, and in this way become conscious citizens of the kingdom of heaven even while they are living.

Salvation is an inner change, an inner reality, which often bears fruit in an external reality. It means to take something that is given, and to bring it to its true self, to make it newly and fully alive, to bring it to continued or full existence.

If people had been cured of illness or other things, and their lives had been extended, in Jesus' ministry, that surface fact – which presumably people had heard about – was not the primary thing that was going on. People were finding their true selves, being freed from inner oppression, being made whole in their spirits, and sometimes that resulted in a longer life.

Who's to say that Jesus wasn't saving himself – or letting himself be saved – by being crucified? Being saved or not saved had nothing to do with whether or not he kept breathing. It had everything to do with who he was following, what was going on his inner life, and whether or not he was being true to his vocation.

Salvation has to do with the real things, the eternal things, the things that count, the things that last, the things that have meaning. It has to do with the truth – not the truth of this cockamamie society, but the truth of God.

When it comes to kingship, we don't know what we are doing, and we don't understand salvation.

3. We are the unwitting subjects of a forever king

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" This is what they said to him. The phrase "King of the Jews" is the Latin translation of the Greek term "Christ" and the Hebrew term "Messiah." The soldiers were mocking his powerlessness. A king would have armies to save him. "Where are your armies, you King?" they were asking.

The armies could have saved him, and the Roman soldiers could have been killed or taken prisoner. Jesus could have reigned in Jerusalem. He might even have kept the

Roman armies at bay so long as he was alive, although the massive military power of Rome would most likely have prevailed. But sooner or later, Jesus would have died. And his reign would have been over.

Instead, he died on the cross and his kingship is forever.

We are the unwitting subjects of a forever king. We are saved and healed by the power of his holy spirit in prayer, in witness from others, in inner conviction, in music, in healing and leading and guiding and ministry. And we are made citizens of his heavenly kingdom in that process. We live in that forever kingdom, day in and day out. As we live in that kingdom, we live between knowledge and ignorance. We do not know what we are doing, but he guides us. We live between sickness and healing, between bondage and freedom, between injustice and justice, between despair and hope, between immorality or amorality and righteousness. We don't understand salvation, but he does. It is the quality of his citizenship, the quality of what his spirit produces in us as we become more and more the citizens of his eternal kingdom.

He died on the cross and his kingship is forever.

There is something going on in this world and there is something going on here in metropolitan Richmond. It will not be completed in the physical lifetime of any one of us, I don't think, -- although that is always possible. Something is happening here. The kingdom is being built. Justice and righteousness and community are being restored. We did not know how far we were away. We thought we were right there with "all men are created equal.;" that is, some of us did. Others thought it could never happen. Both were wrong. We thought we lived in a land of justice, some of us did. Others thought cynically it could never be. Both were wrong. We thought we were living in a healthy community, at least some of us did. Others knew that wasn't true, and thought it could never be. Both were wrong. We thought we knew God. Others knew they didn't, and thought it was never possible. Both were wrong. We thought we were basically good and reasonable Christians. Others felt they had failed and could never be forgiven. Both were wrong. We thought we were already saved. Others thought they could never be saved. Both were wrong.

When it comes to kingship,

We don't know what we are doing. We don't understand salvation.

But this is true: We are the unwitting subjects of a forever king. He has died for us, and he is alive now, reeling us into his kingdom as we speak, and through each of us and those around us, establishing his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. His kingdom will have no end.

AMEN