

Sermon preached by the Rt Rev Dorsey McConnell
on the Feast of Christ the King
November 20, 2022
All Saints Church
Littleton, New Hampshire

Texts: Colossians 1: 11-20, Luke 23: 33-43

For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Then Jesus said, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

This Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, closing out the cycle of readings that began shortly after Pentecost, including the serial reading of the Gospel according to Luke. However, you may notice that we take a standing broad jump from Luke 21, Jesus apocalyptic warnings concerning the end times, straight to his last moments on the Cross two chapters later. This is because the day is commonly celebrated as the Feast of Christ the King. I am a liturgy-nerd, so please bear with me for a few moments of history.

Christ the King is a relatively recent addition to the liturgical calendar, having been established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, originally for a Sunday in October, then moved in 1970 to its present position just before Advent. From there, it was broadly adopted by Anglican and Lutheran Churches. I'm all for it, in case you haven't guessed, for one thing because it has a more festive and sonorous ring than *Ordinary Time, Year C, Proper 29*, which is what we'd be calling it otherwise. But also because of the way it calls us to wake up before we head into Advent.

And it does wake us up, for both the Gospel and the epistle point us toward a King whose crown is not of gold, not of earthly power nor—yet—of heavenly glory, but rather a King whose crown is made of thorns. Of all the things you might want to be thinking about when you're floating through the Christmas music that is already being piped into Walmart, perhaps you wouldn't choose Luke's portrait of this poor, naked, bleeding and dying man, or the bold hymn from Paul's letter to

the Colossians that asks us to look squarely at the Cross and see something different than the world might see.

For Paul asks us to see in the death of Jesus nothing less than the reconciliation of all things in the body of Christ's flesh, who *makes peace by the blood of his Cross*. Paul being Paul, he doesn't explain this; he simply asserts it in this gorgeous hymn, as if to say, *When you look at the Cross, not only at the fact of Jesus death, but the way he dies, you have to choose what you want to see, what you want to make of it.*

The Pharisees see the death of a heretic. Pilate sees the elimination of a public nuisance. Many others, across the world, through the centuries, have seen the untimely death of a healer and prophet, while others have seen the end of a failed revolutionary, *a Palestinian peasant with an attitude*, as one notorious scholar put it. And you could pick any one of these, or you could see instead what Paul sees, the willing self-offering of the *One for whom and through whom all things were created*, this Christ who in his death unleashes his last and greatest work, the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the entire created order into a state of harmony with God.

If you are like me, you might not get there right away: looking at a public execution and seeing it as the glory of God and the advent of a new creation. So, it would be helpful to have a guide, someone who was actually there, but there aren't a lot of candidates. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are no disciples present close to the Cross, they having all forsaken Jesus and fled just when he needed them most. In John's gospel, we see the passion through the eyes of the beloved disciple, who is close by, but that is not going to help us with Luke.

There is however, one who does take it all in, whose experience we may very well be indebted to for any of the details you've just heard: a nameless Roman centurion, the only eyewitness we can point to, who began the day as a soldier and may have ended it as a saint, a worshipper no longer of Caesar, but of this crucified King, as we might if we dare to accept as true all that he describes. He doesn't actually appear in the passage we have just heard—to meet him in person you'll have to read the rest of chapter 23. But since we may owe this entire account to him, let us take a few minutes to see what he might have seen.

He began the day having drawn the short straw for execution duty. I suspect the grim task of guarding the public gallows generally rotated among lower ranking soldiers, but in view of recent public disturbances associated with this Jesus, apparently a centurion was assigned, along with a significant number of soldiers, to ensure against any trouble. This work was at once annoying, disgusting, and boring. Men dying the slow death on the cross were usually of two kinds—they either railed and cursed until they dissolved into a whimpering mass, or they just gave up from the beginning. There was nothing noble about any of it. The whole place smelled of blood and death. And men took an excruciatingly long time to die this way, several hours generally, during which the guards also had to put up with the wailing of friends and relatives, who seemed—thankfully—to be standing at a distance in this case. So, the centurion took his post a few yards away and supervised the scene, as he was paid to do.

What he saw at first did not surprise him. A man on a cross frequently gathered a mob made up of people who love to taunt the weak, who feel better about themselves when they throw something at someone else getting what they deserve. What did surprise him was the makeup of the crowd—not only the usual rabble, but prominent religious leaders were there as well. The upper classes would usually not be caught dead in such a place; but here they were, bitterly cursing the man who hung there. The centurion had rudimentary Aramaic, but enough to gather that the leaders were reacting to the charge posted above Jesus' head, that he was their king. This was of course ridiculous, but he asked himself it was so ridiculous, then why were they so upset about it. As he was pondering this, he noticed a few of his soldiers—obviously bored—trying to entertain themselves by taunting the victim as well. The centurion who had been standing some distance away, came closer so he could hear better, and decided he wasn't pleased. The soldiers had pushed a sponge of sour wine in the man's face, jeered and baited him, until he told them to stop. It was unprofessional. So, he sent them to join those guarding the crowd, and he took their place, right under the cross, where he could see and hear Jesus very well, and it was then that something very strange began to happen to him.

This man was not like any victim the centurion had ever seen. He was clearly suffering, but at the same time, completely in control of himself. Even in his agony, there was a strange peace about him. He was not cursing or whining, though he was speaking something, and as the centurion strained to hear above

the heckling of the mob, he realized the man was actually *praying*: praying to his Father, praying words of forgiveness, forgiving them all, forgiving him. This made the centurion indignant at first; he thought, *Look mate, I don't know how you got yourself into this mess, but I don't need your forgiveness, I'm just doing my job, alright?* But his anger didn't last long. It suddenly melted away, like it was absorbed into the strange peace that flowed from this dying man.

And here the centurion lost track of time. He just watched and listened. He heard one of the two thieves hanging next to Jesus curse him the way the soldiers did. But the other seemed to change before his eyes. He had been panicked and restless, struggling against his bonds, but now, he was becoming more relaxed; he looked resigned, but not in a desperate way, and said something to Jesus, that sounded like *remember me*; and Jesus nodded and told him not to worry, that soon they would be together. In that moment the man relaxed, and there were now two peaceful men, each hanging on a Cross. And one standing by, in whom the strange peace was even now working its way into the deepest part of his being.

There was of course a lot more that happened until it was all over, but this was for the centurion, the turning point. It would be a while before he understood this whole event had re-made him into a new creature—*ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven*, as the old hymn puts it. And if that was so for him, then perhaps it can be so for me, if I can look at the Cross and see what he saw. I think that will be enough to carry me through the coming weeks, with its surge of muzak, retail, and relatives, and my sometimes sinful reactions to all three. It will be more than enough to give me a more open heart, considering how my crucified king has opened his heart to me. It may even be enough to see me through the dark hours of the night when I awaken to some regret from the past, or worry in the present, or some fear of the future, and cannot for an hour or two find peace, until I look again into the face of Christ who is my peace, and begin haltingly to trust him once more, the way the centurion did, retracing the steps of how I first came to believe in him, until I hear his voice again. Then I know I am already with him, and I know there is my joy.