

A Crucified King

Luke 23:33-43

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Why are we talking about the crucifixion so close to Thanksgiving and Advent? In the calendar of the church year, today is Christ the King or The Reign of Christ Sunday. It's the last Sunday of the Christian year—we start a new church year next Sunday with the first Sunday of Advent. Christ the King Sunday was instituted in the early twentieth century in response to persecution many Christians in Mexico were suffering at the hands of their government. It celebrates the fact that Jesus rules over every earthly power and that his reign is coming to fulfill creation in God's new creation. (*The United Methodist Book of Worship* #419; <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/christ-the-king-sunday-year-c-2016#planning>, accessed 11/15/16).

Still, why talk about the crucifixion today? Why is this passage from Luke one of the common readings many churches use today? We need to hold together what Jesus said about God's kingdom and what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus' kingdom teaching and action in his ministry lead to the cross. And the cross and resurrection of Jesus show us God's kingdom.

There's a hymn I've never sung, but its title caught my attention. It brings together kingdom and cross and it leads us into what Luke tells us here:

To mock your reign, O dearest Lord,
they made a crown of thorns;
set you with taunts along that road
from which no one returns.
They could not know, as we do now,
how glorious is that crown;
that thorns would flower on your brow,
your sorrows heal our own.

In mock acclaim, O gracious Lord,
they snatched a purple cloak;
your passion turned, for all they cared,
into a soldier's joke.

They could not know, as we do now,
that though we merit blame,
you will your robe of mercy throw
around our naked shame.

A sceptered reed, O patient Lord,
they thrust into your hand,
and acted out their grim charade
to its appointed end.

They could not know, as we do now,
though empires rise and fall,
your kingdom shall not cease to grow
till love embraces all.

(Fred Pratt Green, "To Mock Your Reign, O Dearest Lord," *The United Methodist Hymnal* #285)

Luke shows us three groups mocking Jesus as he was on the cross. There were the religious leaders, the Roman soldiers, and a crucified criminal. Each questioned the identity of Jesus. They mocked him as king or asked him to prove his kingship by saving himself. But he refused. And by refusing to save himself, he saves others. Their scoffing points to his real identity.

A while back I read a story that illustrates this. Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC, served as a powerful witness during the racial crisis of the 1950s and 60s. The pastor, Warren Carr, wasn't ashamed of the gospel. He had the courage to proclaim the good news that, in the atoning life and death of Jesus Christ, we have all been reconciled to God. Since we have one Lord and one faith and one baptism, we're brothers and sisters without regard to skin color or social class. Living in a rigidly segregated society, that congregation stood with their pastor in applying those claims

to the issue of race. As a result, the church was sometimes attacked. One Thursday morning, after the gospel of reconciliation had been announced the previous day, an ugly slogan appeared on the doors of the church: "Go to hell, Warren Carr." The pastor ordered this insult to be scrubbed off immediately. On Friday, there was a racist slur written on the church entrance: "Go to hell, you ____-loving Warren Carr." Again Carr asked that it be quickly removed.

On Saturday, still more racist abuse was spray-painted across the front of the church. This time the attackers slightly changed their approach as they painted, "This church loves ____s." Carr said to leave this accusation visible for a few days. Despite the offensive slur word, the hatemongers had advertised the church's real business. In their blind fury, they got the gospel right. What they intended as an insult truly stated what the church was about: living as a community of atonement and redemption, loving and inviting everyone to receive forgiveness of sin, to suffer and die and be buried with Christ, and to be raised up to new life in Christ, now and forever (Ralph C. Wood, "The Call of the Crucified," in Roger van Harn, *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed* 115).

That's a hard story to hear. It's a hard story to tell. It's uncomfortable. But the cross is uncomfortable. On the cross of Jesus, there was a sign that announced the charge against him: "This is the King of the Jews." The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus as their Messiah-King. But the accusation that Jesus claimed to be a king got the Romans' attention. In their view, Caesar ruled and anyone who questioned or challenged Caesar's rule had to be removed, destroyed. The people who crucified Jesus didn't really believe he was a king, but that was a convenient charge to use to get rid of him. And that charge led to the mocking of Jesus that we see here.

The irony is that the accusers got it right. Jesus truly is King. He's a different kind of king than any of them imagined. It's on the cross that Jesus shows that he's King and Savior. At the cross Jesus rules and saves.

On the cross Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Most martyrs would call down curses on those who tortured and killed them. But Jesus doesn't call down curses on the people who tortured him and nailed him to the cross. He doesn't ask God to pay

them back for this sin. Instead he does what he had taught his followers to do—he prays for his enemies.

Who's included in Jesus' prayer for "them" to be forgiven? The Jewish leaders who handed Jesus over for execution? The Roman soldiers who carried out the order to execute him? The disciples who betrayed, denied, and abandoned him? What about us? Can we believe that Jesus was praying for our forgiveness as well? That he died to be our Savior, to set us free from sin?

The King on the cross, offering forgiveness, is bringing in new creation. He's bearing the sins of rebellious Israel. He's fulfilling God's promises to Israel. He's bearing everybody's sins. All the powers of evil are concentrating on Jesus at the cross. He meets them with self-giving, sacrificial love and he defeats them. The cross reveals the heart of God's kingdom. God rules through sacrificial, self-giving love. And if we're part of God's kingdom, we face evil in the same way.

At the end of this passage in Luke, Jesus says to a repentant criminal, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus was returning to the Father. Even on the cross, Jesus calls God "Father" and he commits his spirit into the Father's hands (v 46; Psalm 31:5). He continues to trust his Father. The "thief" on the cross was probably some sort of revolutionary, a terrorist. Like so many outsiders and outcasts in Luke's Gospel, he sees Jesus for who he is and receives grace and blessing from Jesus. This criminal rebukes the other one for mocking Jesus. He acknowledges Jesus' innocence. He recognizes that Jesus is King. He identifies with Jesus and seeks to be with him: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And Jesus promises to take him to paradise. In Jewish understanding, "paradise" was the place of the righteous dead. It's the place of spiritual rest and refreshing for faithful people as they wait for the final resurrection when Jesus appears in glory and God's new creation comes.

Returning to the Father, Jesus takes a forgiven criminal along with him. And he takes along everyone who will acknowledge him as King and Lord and put our trust in him.

Don Francisco is a Christian singer/songwriter who's been around for years. I listened to some of his early albums in high school and college. He's most famous for the song "He's Alive." I liked his music and he often told Bible stories in his songs. A few years ago I found his website and was glad to see that he's still in ministry through music. His song about this scene in Luke is called "Too Small a Price." I want to share his great re-telling of the story.

I awoke to hear the jailer turn the key and push the door.
"Get out here!" he shouted, but I stayed there on the floor,
frozen in the terror that rose and filled my brain.
I knew what they intended; I could not face the pain.

Then soldiers came into the cell and dragged me to the yard.
They threw me down before a cross and brought the whip down hard.
"Carry it!" they shouted, as I struggled to me feet.
I put my shoulder under it and dragged it to the street.

I stumbled through a wall of screams as they drove me through the
gate.
It seemed that thousands lined the streets, their voices filled with
hate.
Like a wolf pack in the night that moves in for the kill,
they closed the gap and followed us as we started up the hill.

And it seemed I'd barely reached the top when they grabbed me
from behind.
They threw the cross down under me and tied the ropes that bind
the arms close to the beams as they nailed the feet and hands.
And they raised the cross up in the air and dropped it in its stand.

Through a blur of pain I saw the cross there next to mine.
There were people all around it so I looked to read the sign.

It was nailed there up above His head so the world could see the
news
that the man who seemed so helpless there was the King of all the
Jews.

The crowd that stood around His cross made jokes about His name;
they shouted, laughed and spat on Him so I joined in the game.
I said, "Hey! If you're the King why don't you get us down from here?"
But the taunt just sounded hollow and it echoed in my ears.

'Cause He looked at me with eyes that seemed to reach into my heart;
they shone a light on all my lies and tore my life apart.
There was more that lay behind His gaze than simply blood and clay,
but knowing was too much for me; I had to look away.

Then I chanced another look at Him as He was looking down
where the soldiers who'd just crucified us drank there on the ground.
And although He spoke them quietly, somehow His words came
through.

He said, "Father, please forgive them; they don't know what they do."

Then as if they'd heard Him speak, the crowd began to roar,
whipped to frenzy by the priests who urged them on to more.
But the worse the accusations, now, the plainer I could see
the guilt of the accusers—not the One there next to me.
Then the man upon the other cross began to curse and swear;
his voice was filled with venom as he hurled it through the air
when all the horror that was in him and had laid his life to waste
came out in every syllable he flung in Jesus' face.

And Jesus only looked at him, but something rose inside of me,
and in spite of all that watched us there, it couldn't be denied.
Because his righteousness and innocence were shining bright and
strong,

I just couldn't keep my silence and that cursing still went on.

I cried out, "Don't you fear the wrath of God even at the end?
You'll curse us both into the pit—is that what you intend?
We're only getting what we're due—we've sinned our whole lives
long.
But don't you talk to Him that way—He's done nothing wrong!"

Then with all my courage, in a voice not quite my own,
I asked him, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your throne."
He answered me and, even then, His love was undisguised.
He said, "Before the sun has set today, you'll be with Me in Paradise."

Well the shouts and curses did not stop even when the sunlight
ceased,
but somehow in the midst of it, my soul had been released.
And though the agony continued, it was still too small a price
to be allowed to hear those words, and to die beside the Christ!
[\(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYmucQyOBuA;](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYmucQyOBuA;)
[http://www.donfrancisco.com/\)](http://www.donfrancisco.com/)

A crucified King, ruling through sacrifice and self-giving love, calls us alongside him. God shows that Jesus really is King by raising him from the dead. Now Jesus invites us to share life with him, by the power of the Holy Spirit to live lives of sacrificial self-giving love. He brings God's kingdom and brings us into the kingdom. At the end of this life, he'll bring us into paradise and then some day resurrection and new creation. And all of that flows from the cross where our King is crucified.

Come to the cross, honor Jesus as King, receive forgiveness, and come into the new life he gives.