

THE ONCE, PRESENT AND FUTURE KING

Jeremiah 23. 1-6
Colossians 1. 11-20
Luke 23. 33-43

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, the Last Sunday of the Christian Year, is called the Feast of Christ the King. The appointed Gospel and Epistle present descriptions of our Lord which I would like to juxtapose, because they show what sort of king he is and the extent of his kingdom.

In St Luke's Gospel, we have the scene of Jesus crucified between two criminals. The Roman soldiers divide his garments by casting lots. The religious rulers deride him with an insult which strikes at the very heart of Christ's life: 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' Joining in, the soldiers offer him sour wine and mock, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' And as this unfolds our Lord says, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'

Some years after Jesus's crucifixion, a former persecutor of Christ's disciples, Saul of Tarsus (now St Paul the Apostle), wrote the words in today's Epistle to the Colossians. Our Lord, Paul said, is 'the image (literally the icon) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible....all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church;...for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile himself to all things,...by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

In other words the man on the cross, Jesus, the one suffering such indignities, is none other than Almighty God in the flesh. And by suffering such things, God in Christ is reconciling the world, the universe, to himself.

The Gospel, the Good News, is that the Almighty and Everlasting God is the Lord on the cross. Or to put it the other way round, the Good News is that the Lord on the cross is the Almighty and Everlasting God. This is what we profess in the Nicene Creed when we say that the Son is very God of very God, begotten not created, of one substance with the Father, the maker of all things, who for us men and for salvation came down from heaven and was made man.

The Good News reveals to us the nature of God from all eternity; namely that God is self-giving Love, and that we who crown his creation are free creatures, creatures who are endowed with freedom. We have the capacity to love God and our fellow creatures; or not. This is why there is evil in the world: since God is Love, and since there can be no love without freedom, freedom includes the risk and the possibility of us not loving in return.

Our sin does not surprise God. God has always known the risk of his creation's freedom and the cost of saving and redeeming it. For the only one capable of saving creation is God himself. So it is that the apostles sometimes refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God prepared before the foundation of the world.¹ There, they are speaking of creation's redemption by God the Son.

At the cross, physically and personally, God in Christ reaches out to his fallen creatures. One of the criminals hanging beside our Lord joins the chorus mocking him: 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebukes him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of

¹ Cf. Rev 13. 8; I Pet 1. 19-20; Acts 2. 23-24.

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.’ And Christ said to him, ‘Truly, I tell you, today you shall be with me in Paradise.’ One person at least, the penitent criminal hanging next to our Lord, took hold of the redemption that was offered to him that day.

Not only (in the words of Paul to the Colossians) does the eternal Son of God manifest the nature of God; Christ the Son of Man manifests authentic sinless human nature and exercises perfect freedom. Although he was not tainted by sin as we are, and therefore *truly free*, Jesus chose to fulfil his mission and die in a sinner’s place. His crucifixion is at once the lowest and highest point of his kingship.

The image that we have before us in Luke’s gospel is indeed that of a King. Yet the King’s position on the cross does not denote power, but rather powerlessness. It does not indicate rule or control, but rather surrender. The cross is an odd sort of throne for a King; and his crown of thorns is a strange crown for someone who in fact is the King of Kings. Nevertheless, on this feast day, we dare to proclaim the Kingship of the one who died on that cross.

In another gospel it is written, ‘So if the Son makes you free, you are free indeed’ (Jn 8. 36). As he lay pinned to his cross, Christ did not lose one iota of his kingship. Rather, he the King freely chose to die for the sins of humanity in order to *make us free*.

If the Son makes us free, that means that we (by taking baby steps, one at a time), may indeed learn to follow our Lord and to imitate him. It means that we have the hope of growing up into maturity as free children of God. We, who were previously slaves to sin, can now learn the life of emancipation.

I wonder, what baby steps should you and I be taking today, in order to advance and grow in our experience of the freedom our Lord has given us?

Growing up may indeed be a life's work and require many baby steps; but serving Jesus (our King who rules yesterday, today and for ever) is perfect freedom.²

Amen.

² Taken from the Second Collect for Peace in Morning Prayer (*The Book of Common Prayer*).