

## The Deed Was Done!

Luke 23:33-43

Today is the festival of the Reign of Christ. We don't often get to hear from this scripture because many churches only speak on them during Good Friday services and definitely don't think of them in relations to Christ's reign. More often the words "Reign of Christ" suggest to us the high and magnificent power and pomp of a glorious king whose rule contrasts with others above whom he is to be exalted. This lectionary text makes clear to us something quite different. The majesty of this king is revealed, not when we look up, but when we look down. **Eberhard Busch**

In this scripture our king made an elegant statement, unfettered by embellishment of prose or exaggeration, glistening with empathy and compassion. His statement is profoundly moving because of its context and circumstance, and it is known to be true simply because of the reputation and identity of the one who spoke it: "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). For a dying man, a convicted and confessed thief, and everything else we think we know about him, these words uttered by the crucified Christ and King must have caused sheer unadulterated ecstasy—unspeakable joy!

Jesus' last words to another human being before his death and resurrection were words of forgiveness congruent with the ministry of his short life. Jesus spent his life teaching about the kingdom of God, preaching liberation to the captives, and healing those who were sick and lame. Jesus' miracles and teachings had so confounded the status quo of the elders, priests, and politicians that he was deemed a threat to their religion and their way of life. Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One had challenged the unjust treatment of women, preached the need for patience with

children, and accused the Pharisees and Sadducees of lacking good faith. His ministry had been controversial, powerful, and world altering, to the point that those whom he threatened condemned him to death by crucifixion.

As we survey this scene and the thief, we discover we have much in common. Who among us is worthy of grace and the notice of the King of Glory? We are more like the thieves who hung next to Jesus than we are like Jesus. We do not know what happened to the thief who hung on the other side of Jesus' cross—the one who, rather than asking for mercy, spoke chiding words, challenging Jesus to show his might and power by saving himself and the criminals who surrounded him. The thief was only following the pattern of the religious leaders who mocked Jesus; and the soldiers who mocked him; so the dying thief just joined in the ridicule: So this is “the King of the Jews”...why don't you prove it! Yet the grace of God as revealed in the incarnate Jesus, the Christ, the King, is a word of forgiveness and deep, abiding love; demonstrating that he really was King. It is hard for us to believe in the gracious God, in the forgiving God, in the God who would love us even when we disappoint and sin.

Jesus' stories of forgiveness are legendary. Jesus spent much of his ministry describing his reign and the kingdom of God as having different rules and different expectations from the rules and laws and penalties of humanity. He said that the kingdom of God is like the love freely given when a son foolishly asked his father for his inheritance, took it, went to a foreign land, and squandered all he had. Then, when the son came to his senses and returned, hoping his father would forgive him, he was met with celebration, rejoicing, and jubilation because of the father's great love and ability to forgive him (Luke 15:11-23).

Jesus said that his reign and the kingdom of God is like a shepherd who cares so deeply for all his sheep that when one is lost, the shepherd goes in search of the lost and does not give up until the sheep is found (Luke 15:1-7). Jesus said the

kingdom of God is like a rich man who gives a party and when the other rich people are too busy for the party, the rich man throws open the invitation and invites the poor, the blind, and the lame to be part of the feast (Luke 14:16-23). Jesus spent more time talking about his reign and the kingdom of God than any other topic or issue. Jesus' act of forgiveness while dying on the cross resounded with his teachings that forgiveness is given to all who repent and believe, even condemned thieves during their own executions.

All this makes me wonder about Jesus' teachings in last week's scripture where he told his disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; they will arrest you and persecute you; make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; you *will be given* words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict; you will be betrayed; and they will put some of you to death; you will be hated by all because of my name; but endure. In today's scripture we see Jesus living through some of these same situations and modeling for us what he did when he was falsely accused, brought to trial, endured death on a Roman cross to die for the sins of the world, for your sins and my sins. He modeled what he meant by his words of encouragement and his very actions!

This kind of love and forgiveness is a challenging notion for many of us. Part of our inability to believe and trust the loving and forgiving power of God's grace and mercy is our inability to believe that other people deserve mercy. *We* want to judge whom God lets into heaven. Many of us are more comfortable not knowing what happened to the thief who scoffed at Jesus than knowing that an undeserving thief was let into paradise. We would rather have had Jesus say that God loves the people we like and the people we say we are like, and that God does not love the people we do not like and the people we say are not like us. We would prefer if God did not love the crackheads and addicts, the adulterers, the thieves, the prostitutes, the rebellious teenagers, the thoughtless neighbor, the person from the

other political party, and the disgruntled employees. We would prefer it if paradise were exclusively for the nice people, the clean people, the polite people, the well-behaved people, the right people, the right thinking people.

As Christians, we have faith, not because we are strong, in fact we are weak; but because God is strong and God is love. We have faith because the grace of God is sufficient for all. There is grace for us *and* for the people we do not like. We have faith because God is our refuge and our strength. We have faith and confess Christ our Lord and King because God will hear and forgive our sins and their sins too. Our salvation is not dependent upon the preacher, the Regional Minister, the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), or each other, but on a loving, grace-giving God, and his Son Jesus, the Christ and King. We confess because God's saving grace will heal, restore, redeem, and forgive those whom God has created and whom God loves fiercely. All have sinned and fallen short; all have angered, frustrated, and disappointed God. God so loved the entire world that whosoever, whosoever, whosoever believes shall get all the grace that God has to give. Thank God that God gives grace and that we do not.

Jesus spent his entire ministry teaching and preaching about the kingdom of God. It is hard for us to understand why the King would end his earthly life on a Roman cross. But Jesus, our King was born for that very task. He died that we might live. One of Jesus' last forgiving acts on earth was to proclaim that a repentant sinner would be with him that day in heaven. His task was done. He was faithful to the very end. His deed was completed...the deed was done. Oh, praise God! **Nancy Lynne Westfield**

Today we celebrate and fellowship on this Thanksgiving Sunday. We thank God for our families, our freedom, and for the love and salvation that we receive through Jesus Christ, our Lord and King.

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