

November 20, 2022

Year C: Reign of Christ (Luke 23:33-43)

It's November the 20th already. Thanksgiving is far behind us; Remembrance Day is past; and, in just 5 weeks, it will be Christmas! And the Christmas panic is already well under way: the decorations have been up in the stores for weeks; flyers and emails full of 'gift ideas' come every day, and already people are asking that most annoying of questions "Have you finished your Christmas shopping yet?"

The mad dash to be ready for Christmas is well under way, and then today our lectionary gives us Good Friday again. Just when we were getting into the mood for angels and shepherds and the baby Jesus, we get the cross and the death, and we can't help but wonder why.

In 1925 Pope Pius XI decreed that the last Sunday in the liturgical year would be dedicated to the Reign of Christ the King. At the end of the year, before we go back to the beginning again, we remember that the last word goes to God.

In 1925 the Pope had good reason to want to remind the world that God had the last word. The grief and chaos of the Great War was still fresh and recovery was slow and painful. Already, especially in Europe, tyrannical and unscrupulous leaders were emerging. Repressive governments and dictatorial leaders, who promised restoration and retribution, were gaining power.

In the midst of the grief, chaos and fear, the Pope wanted people to remember who, in the end, is really in charge. And that's a message that never goes out of date, so most Christian denominations have adopted and kept this last Sunday of the liturgical year as a celebration of the Reign of Christ, or Christ the King.

That all makes sense, but why do we celebrate Christ the King with the story of his death? Why not choose a gospel reading that has an uplifting image of power and splendour? Why not a picture of Jesus as the triumphant king? Why not a gospel reading that shows Jesus decked out in majesty as the Son of God?

Well, there are a couple of good reasons why not. First, there is no gospel reading that depicts Jesus in regal trappings, no matter how hard you look. That was not what his life was about. Second, it is the crucifixion, the innocent man suffering a shameful and painful death for the sake of others, which presents the real picture of the triumphant Jesus.

You can find all kinds of magnificent illustrations of Jesus wearing a crown and robes and sitting on a golden throne. They are popular images for stained glass windows and paintings and books. They convey an important message, but NOT an episode in the life of Jesus. Generations of creative minds have imagined what Christ the King should look like, based on their ideas of what royalty looks like.

But what should royalty look like? There is a story about Princess Anne visiting some villages in Africa while working for the Save the Children Fund. In one place, the children knew that the Princess had been working hard to give them better lives and new futures, and they wanted to see her. But when she arrived, they were disappointed. She didn't look like a princess. Fortunately, she was used to this confusion, and that evening, she came back, wearing a long dress and jewels and a tiara, and the children were delighted. Looking like a 'real' princess made no difference to her work, but it made the children happy.

Jesus didn't look like a king and he didn't behave like a king, and the people who were looking for a king were disappointed by him. But, unlike those children, they wouldn't have been satisfied with a change of costume. They wanted

someone to wage war for them, to squash their enemies and make them rich. Instead, they got a king who served others. A king who put up with ridicule and mockery. A king willing to die for others. A king who forgave people who hurt him, and welcomed sinners.

It is precisely the crucifixion that shows how very different this king is. All his life he has resisted the constant human temptation to focus on himself instead of others; to make his own path easy; to save himself. His journey began with those same temptations in the wilderness, they followed him all his life, sometimes in the mouths of friends, and here, at his journey's end, the same temptations are repeated by the leaders, the soldiers, and even the criminal hanging beside him.

“IF you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

So, why doesn't he save himself? Why does he stay there in that place of suffering? Why does anyone willingly stay in a place of suffering? Why does anyone ever volunteer to share human suffering? Because love does that.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran scholar and pastor who left Germany in the mid-1930's, when Hitler started to crack down on religious groups who opposed him. Bonhoeffer was living in safety in America, but he couldn't stay there. His parishioners were being imprisoned for speaking out against the evil around them. Some were dying for their faith. He couldn't stop it, but he couldn't abandon them and save himself. So he went back to share their struggle. He spoke out. He was arrested. And finally he died with them. Love does that.

Today we came to the end of the mortal life of Jesus, and next week we'll start getting ready to celebrate the beginning of it.

- Today is a good time to remember that earthly rulers and regimes will pass

away and in the end God is in charge; lest we get caught up in the details and forget.

- Today is a good time to remember that the baby who will be born in the stable will meet a nasty death; lest we get carried away by the prettiness and forget.
- And today is a good time to remember that, precisely because God is in charge, precisely because Christ reigns, death does not have the last word. Today, as we leave the old year and prepare to move into the new one, we remember that **death is always followed by new life, and God always gets the last word.**