

REIGN OF CHRIST, YEAR C

20 November 2022

Luke 23:32-43

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ, or Christ the King Sunday, in our church calendar. It is the end of the year, liturgically speaking. In a sense, it is like we Anglicans are celebrating New Years Eve this morning. Many of us mark the end of a year by looking back and remembering significant events from the past little while. At the same time, we look forward to what is ahead, usually full of hope and optimism about what the future might hold for us.

As these secular New Years activities are often quite celebratory, it might seem curious to draw the comparison to our gathering this morning, as the lectionary concludes this year, Year C, with the crucifixion. What we will find though, as we dig into this text, is that the gospel invites us to do the very thing we are used to doing at times such as these; look back and look forward. In so doing, we may better apprehend our King who is crucified.

There is discord in the image of a King who is crucified; one who rules, who has dominion, is brought to the lowest of the low. Historically people have been scandalized by the notion of a crucified Lord. Crucifixion was the form of death reserved for the lowest of the low in Roman society: slaves, thieves, and outcasts. The Jews regarded crucifixion as a curse, which is why Paul writes that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23 NIV). It was a painful way to die; it is where the word 'excruciating' comes from. Crucifixion was also a humiliating way to die. It was a very public form of torture and execution intended to send a message to onlookers: do not cross the Roman authorities.

I want to suggest to you this morning that we too are scandalized by the crucified Lord. How often do we find ourselves thinking that Christ is King *despite* the crucifixion? We attempt mental gymnastics to hold these two seemingly paradoxical truths together. What we will find in Luke's gospel this morning is that the crucifixion does not present a problem for us in understanding Christ's Kingship; indeed, the crucifixion is *central* to our understanding the Reign of Christ. Several details given in the text help us to apprehend how this is.

The passage today begins with Luke sharing that Jesus and two other criminals arrive at a place called the Skull, where they are crucified. Like we spoke about a couple of weeks ago, names in the Biblical narrative are something that we ought to pay attention to. Not only the names of people, but the names of places. The Skull, or Golgotha, is a hill in Jerusalem where two recesses really make the place look like a human skull.

This place, and its name, are reminiscent of Christian iconography in art and architecture that communicate death. Early Christian art used visual cues to transmit the story of the faith to largely illiterate populations. For instance, the *fleur de lis* is a Marian symbol. A combination of flowers: the lily, representing Mary's purity, and the iris, representing Mary's sorrow, the symbol communicates these things about the Mother of our Lord. Similarly, medieval

illuminated prayer books and manuscripts often include images of a peacock, which is a symbol of resurrection. A human skull, sometimes accompanied by other bones, indicates mortality. This is a symbol that endures, even in popular culture. For instance, Shakespeare's Hamlet holds the exhumed head of Yorick, or even Halloween decorations includes images of skull and crossbones. These are more modern appropriations of ancient artistic symbolism called *momento mori*, which translated from Latin means 'remember that you have to die'. Remember that you must die.

Remember that Jesus did not have to die, but chose to empty himself, for us and for our salvation. Recall in Luke 9, Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem. Unwavering, he has arrived at the Skull, where he is killed. This is, of course, is a death that is done to him by the Roman authorities; but, remember that it does not come as a surprise to Jesus. Indeed, he has tried to tell his disciples that this will come to pass, so that they will not regard his death as a failure, and furthermore him as a failure, but rather necessary; not so that he may come into his kingdom, but to make a way for us to be with him in paradise.

Another aspect of our gospel reading this morning that is central to our understanding of a crucified King, is the number of implicit references that Luke makes to Old Testament texts. If we were to go line by line through this passage, each detail that the gospel writer includes is the fulfillment of a prophecy given in the Old Testament. We hear in Luke echoes of Isaiah, Psalm 66, and several direct reference to Psalm 22. For example, Luke recounts that Jesus' clothes are divided by the soldiers casting lots. The psalmist writes: **"They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing,"** (Psalm 22:18 NIV). Furthermore, the gospel states that at the crucifixion, people stood watching and the rulers even sneered at him. Likewise, the psalmist has prayed, **"people stare and gloat over me,"** (Psalm 22:17 NIV). The connection between these texts continues when the soldiers mock Jesus, as the psalmist writes: **"All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads,"** (Psalm 22:7). Again, this is a reminder that the crucifixion was not a surprise to God, but part of the plan all along.

Moreover, by including these details of the crucifixion that echo the words of Psalm 22, Luke refers to the whole of that text. This was a common way of teaching Scripture in first-century Jewish tradition; quoting part of a text to recall the whole in the mind of the hearer. The gospels capture examples of Jesus teaching in this way. For example, in communicating his 'mission statement' in Luke 4, Jesus quotes part of Isaiah 61. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus speaks the first words of Psalm 22 from the cross: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Psalm 22:1a NIV). What is the whole of the text? Where does the Psalmist take us in this prayer?

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.^[1]

²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

- ²⁹To him,^[j] indeed, shall all who sleep in^[k] the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.^[l]
- ³⁰Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord
- ³¹and^[m] proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it. (Psalm 22:27-31 NRSV)

He has done it. In other words, “today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus declares his dominion, even over death, from the cross. Though Luke has not yet arrived at his account of the Resurrection, in the crucifixion the Reign of Christ is a work that has already been completed for God who is outside of time.

What does this mean for us; for who we are in Christ? The Reign of Christ the King means that there is nothing that can separate us from his love. It means that by his death, he has made a way for us to be with him in paradise. Though we live in this hope, not yet seeing it in full, we are a people who proclaim his deliverance. We are the future generations who say, “he has done it.” May we begin this new year with the truth of his reign sealed to us, looking forward with hope and optimism to our future with our King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen.