

“The King”
 November 20, 2016
 Christ the King Sunday
 Text: Luke 23:33-43

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of 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." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Introduction

We arrive today at the end of the Liturgical Christian calendar. It is a day we call Christ the King Sunday. It is the final Sunday before we move into Advent and begin the journey toward that special day, a day like no other, when we celebrate the coming of God into humanity with the birth of Jesus, the baby who would be King. An unlikely king. But on Christ the King Sunday the Common Lectionary takes us to a dark place in scripture. We are in the Gospel of Luke, which we have been in for the past several months, all leading up to this; and we hear Luke's rendition of the moment that changed history. And abruptly he begins,

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

The Skull

The Skull. There is a reason it is called "The Skull," or in Greek, Golgotha. Some say it was the place where Adam's skull was buried. Others say it got its name simply because of its shape. But many say it had something to do with King David. David; the shepherd boy with ruddy cheeks who would one day be king over all of Israel. An unlikely king, smaller in stature than all of his brothers. But God knew that this good shepherd would make a great king. And the day when young David slew the giant Philistine whose name was Goliath he made his mark and his future was set. But the part that is often overlooked, and you can find it in 1 Samuel chapter 17, is that he cut

off Goliath's head and brought it to Jerusalem where he likely buried it outside the city walls. It is believed that David buried Goliath's head at Golgotha—the place that is called “The Skull;” the place where, Luke writes, Jesus is now being crucified between two criminals.

The Heart of Darkness

Theses are dark times. And Golgotha is a dark place. The light of the world is being eclipsed by a darkness that has taken over the hearts of men. And as clouds roll in and shadows creep across the landscape, *those at the foot of the cross are casting lots (or rolling dice) to divide his clothing.*

But from where Jesus hangs he says, *“Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.”*

And the people stand by, watching; frozen; unable to do anything about what is happening right before their eyes. How could this be? How did it come to this? He is the Messiah, the deliverer, the Son of the living God. But now this? His followers are devastated. Now who would protect them? Who would look out for them? Dark times are getting darker.

Then the scoffers start raising their voices. It's the leaders, according to Luke. *The leaders scoff at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”*

The crucifixion settles it. It's proof, finally, that this prophet from Nazareth is a fake, a phony, a fraud. Look at him now. This is no savior.

It's a total eclipse of the heart, and darkness has completely blocked out the light.

The King of the Jews

But still, it is not over. The torture continues. Because now *the soldiers are also mocking him.* Absolute power and might is now antagonizing absolute vulnerability. One comes up with an idea—a toast.

The soldiers come up and offer him sour wine, and say, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

They say this because there's an inscription over him, *“This is the King of the Jews.”* It's typical for Rome to put a placard above the condemned on the cross to explicitly name their crime. In Jesus' case, it reads, “The King.” It's Pilate's signature mark on the occasion. It's meant to mock; meant to slap the people of God.

Who, in those days, could save you? The king could. If you had the protection of the king, you had everything. But now, all the soldiers can do is laugh. This king is powerless.

An Unlikely King

Then above the laughing and the jeering, yet another voice is heard. A jarring voice; the voice of a fool. While all the sins of the world are flowing into Jesus at the cross, *one of the criminals hanging there keeps deriding Jesus and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* It's as if Jesus is in the desert again being tempted by the devil himself.

But the other criminal rebukes him, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? We indeed have been condemned justly, we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Truth. It's

the voice of justice that cries out for the innocent, giving sound to words that bounce off the Skull and reverberate on the walls just outside of Jerusalem, confirming what is known by God, all the angels, and all of humanity at its deepest level: “This man has done nothing wrong.”

And this criminal, this sinner, this one who has used up all their chances, this dying person at the end of the line, this ultimate loser in life who has nothing left to lose, looks up and sees him: the unlikely king of an upside-down kingdom, wearing an uncommon crown, and dying an unimaginable death. And with one last plea for a king’s protection he says,

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus—and this is the good news—Jesus, who always cares for the outcast, whose heart always breaks for the accused, who repeatedly associates with sinners, who gladly accepts the ones the rest of society discards, and who always responds to great faith, replies, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

Here at the crucifixion, history is being turned on its head, and God is redefining what it means to be King.

Out Into Mission

It must seem so strange to the rest of the world. So odd, really. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we have a different kind of king. We operate in a different kind of kingdom, and ours is different kind of allegiance and obedience. It’s not power and might we seek, but vulnerability and service. It’s not security from those in high places that we place our confidence in, but protection from one that saves our souls. It’s not material crowns of gold we strive for, but crowns of glory made one strand at a time over a lifetime of learning about the unlikely king whose humble crown epitomized his selfless care for others.

We turn now to Advent; and our search and our wait for the One enters a new season. We search for a baby, we wait for an unlikely King. Amen.