Luke23:33-43

> 33When 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. 34Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And 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!" 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him: "This is the King of the Jews." 39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the Christian year. It is a relatively new Christian Festival. Pope Pius the 11th started this celebration in 1925. He started it in response to the rise of Fascism in Italy with the 1922 coming to power of Benito Mussolini. Mussolini's purpose was to restore Italy's past greatness, even to the point of seeing Italy as the successor to the Roman Empire, with actual ultimate allegiance to the state and its dictator. In contrast, Christ the King Sunday was meant to counter this and affirm a Christian's ultimate loyalty is to Jesus Christ, not to any leader, movement, or political association.

For us, it is a reminder that we must not let anything stand in the way of our allegiance to Christ, not even the Church. In that way, it is as current as today's headlines, with the rise of Christian Nationalism, where some churches and church leaders seek political power and cultural domination. Today's passage reminds us there is a power seeking our allegiance, not based on domination, but love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and service. A power revealed by Jesus on the Cross.

This Sunday is meant to highlight the contrast between Jesus and his kingdom and the Roman system—God with love and forgiveness versus death and power. Jesus, who is now physically battered and vulnerable, is the true king and not those with the power backed by legions and warships.

It goes beyond any one point in time as a permanent reminder that our ultimate loyalty is to Jesus. Remember that above the cross is the placard reading "King of the Jews". Some ancient versions indicate that the sign was in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew to underscore the universality of Christ's kingdom. The authorities meant it as a sign of his criminality, and with irony, it contrasts Jesus with the system that crucified him. They did not realize that they had really testified to who he was—Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

His death is, to paraphrase Dickens, a tale of two kingdoms. And our allegiance is to the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, not to anything or anyone else. We know the nature of the kingdom of God is revealed through the life, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. It is a kingdom of love, mercy, and forgiveness. Jesus, who, by making himself vulnerable, is remembered by almost all people, while the powers of his day are only recognized by their failure to realize that Jesus was from God, and God dwelt in him.

Now, even at his most vulnerable on the cross, Jesus is not powerless; his is the power to forgive, and that is something that all the forces in the world can't compel. Forgiveness can't be commanded; it must come from within.

Let's look to the text which, like so much of Jesus' ministry, is based on the theme of reversal; here, it is the story of the love of God and the resurrection that overcame Rome's might at the cross. Jesus doesn't look much like a king but more like a convicted criminal about to breathe his last. But we know he is the true ruler of all.

The first words Luke records from the cross are Jesus' prayer to God, which we are privileged to overhear:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” These powerful words are a challenge to us. We know about forgiveness and how difficult it can be sometimes, and sometimes we can’t forgive because of the nature of the offence. But that is not the norm. We have the high ideal of Jesus to forgive in one place, he says at least 70 times 7 by way of saying we are not to keep count.

Jesus forgives all who put him on the cross, those who deserve it the least, and that is a noble ideal we should strive for. That act of forgiveness is backed by a reality that we should never forget: we are forgiven even when we place ourselves in the category of unforgivable. From the cross, we hear we are forgiven along with those who were actually there.

The power of love, redemption, and forgiveness speaks through Jesus when, even at his worst moment, he prays for forgiveness. When “God, strike them dead” would be a more natural response, he doesn’t summon a host of angels to fight for him and save him. He summons the power of Forgiveness and mercy even upon the system that condemned him, the soldiers who stood by, the silent crowd, the scoffers gathered around him, the two criminals executed with him, and by extension, you and me. God’s kingdom is one of mercy and forgiveness for all. That stretches us to forgive beyond what we imagine we are capable of.

While some situations may be impossible for us now, due to their severity, our allegiance is to Christ’s kingdom, which is built on forgiveness, forgiveness for all. It calls to us and fills us with hope that one day we can be free from the evil done to us through the power of God’s forgiveness.

Remember, Jesus is already so battered that Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the cross because Jesus, in such a weakened state, cannot. When they arrive and Jesus is crucified, we then meet various people present at the horrendous scene. To paraphrase the song, the people who were there when they crucified our lord.

At the cross, the first people we notice are soldiers dividing his clothes. This was a gruesome perk for soldiers performing the crucifixion. Their actions compound the degradation by doing this while a naked, tortured man is dying a slow, painful death. They are trying to take whatever dignity he has away from him, but they can’t. Jesus rises above their inhumanity and forgives them. And they will later mock him by offering sour wine, not wine befitting a king. And Jesus forgives them for both.

Then there is the crowd that just stood by doing nothing. Their silence is deafening. These are the folks who represent us. Yes, we were there when they crucified my lord. They may well be overwhelmed by the violence and their own fear that they'd better not step out of line. They may also be rendered speechless by Jesus’ prayer, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” That prayer is unimaginable, but it is for them as well Then we hear from the religious leaders taunting him and mocking him and poking fun at the sign above him, saying “King of the Jews.” They shout, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself; if you’re all that, prove it. We dare you.” And most of us know the pain of being made fun of maliciously. That is bad enough; sometimes it sticks with us throughout our lives. For Jesus, it is compounded by his physical anguish. To be sure, they mean this to heap cruelty upon cruelty as if the cross and what he was suffering weren’t cruel enough. But Jesus forgives them. Even one of the criminals chimes in “If you’re so great, save yourself and save us.” Jesus forgives him because Jesus followed a different path.

If Jesus had wanted to avoid this fate, he could have stayed away from Jerusalem, Pilate, and the authorities, but his vision of his mission prevented him from doing so.

He chose to reveal that not even the evil of the cross could stop God from loving and forgiving us.

But the other criminal, although criminal is probably not what they were. They were most likely insurrectionist challenging the authority of the state. The cross was an instrument of Rome to terrorize and keep order. The other class of people commonly crucified were runaway enslaved people. It was a long, slow, agonizing death after which the corpses were cast away for the feral dogs and birds to eat.

The other criminal catches a glimpse of who Jesus is as he says, "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." This one recognizes who he is and what he has done, but also takes responsibility for it and seeks help not from Pilate but from Jesus. Jesus forgives him.

And he follows this with a plea: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." To which Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." By speaking these words, we catch a glimpse of God present in Jesus in the midst of his suffering and ours. God won't abandon us in suffering but is with us. And through that suffering, He receives the promise of being with Jesus in paradise, where pain and suffering are a thing of the past.

Even today, those words bring comfort to so many. Jesus enthroned on the cross declares the nature of God's kingdom: one of love and mercy for all, and of forgiveness, especially for those who have lost hope. And on the cross, he speaks the divine and human words of salvation. He issues a decree backed by the authority of God. "This day, you will be with me in Paradise."

It is important to remember that the cross is not just a vile, heinous instrument of torture and death; it serves as Jesus' throne from which he prays for and grants forgiveness for all. Remember the gospel has a theme of reversals, and this is the most significant reversal ever: the cross, an instrument of state-sanctioned torture and humiliation, becomes the earthly throne for Jesus.

And in the words of a song by Nicole Mullen, our response should be, "Hail Jesus, you're my king."

Later in the chapter, even a Roman soldier, a centurion, is moved by Jesus' behavior, as after Jesus dies. He says in Matthew 27:54: Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Forming a perfect bracket of innocence, as first declared by Pilate, that Jesus is innocent. Jesus forgives him, too—a Roman soldier, maybe even the one in charge of the crucifixion.

On the cross, Jesus is revealed as the divine king of love, forgiveness, and hope. Just as the sign above the cross says, he really is the king of the Jews, and as the hymn goes, Ruler of Creation. So this is not just a story of long ago and far away; it is also the story of our king. And his declaration is "You are forgiven," pronounced from the throne of cross by the king of love, forgiveness, and second chances, and that is good news for us.