

Luke 23:33-43 Christ the King Sunday

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.'

Using the term "king" to describe Jesus threatens to miss the whole point of the gospel because the term gives a fixed sense of order rather than a dynamic sense of God's rule on earth.

The kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of heaven in Matthew) is not simply about replacing an earthly ruler with a heavenly one. In proclaiming the coming kingdom of God, Jesus was not advocating a change of rulers. Rather, Jesus was announcing a new way of being in relationship with each other and with God. As we seek to be followers of Jesus, it's not the ruler that changes, but the **realm** in which we live that changes.

If proclaiming "Jesus is Lord," simply means giving our allegiance to a different ruler, then most of our lives could remain untouched. As long as we didn't swear allegiance to some Caesar or other king, we could more or less conduct business as usual and conceive of faith as a private affair.

But the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is better understood as the *realm* or *environment* of God. It entails a whole new reality where *nothing* is the same -- not our relationships or rules, not our view of self or others, not our priorities or principles -- nothing. Everything we thought we knew about kings and kingdoms gets turned right on its head.

This entirely new reality is difficult to conceptualize. I think that's probably why Jesus uses parables to explain it. Parables don't correspond to reality directly. They are often stories that surprise and even scandalize us. They almost always have a hidden meaning that is understood only after reflection. Parables get at reality sideways, disrupting our sensibilities and overturning our conventional mindset in order to show how reality *really is* in the new realm of God.

We get a glimpse of this new realm of God in the parable of the generous employer who defies all understanding of fair play by paying both, those who have been working all day, and those who labored just a few hours, the same amount of money. We get some sense of how radical this realm is in the parable of the prodigal son, when the father humiliates himself again and again by running after both his wayward and legalistic sons.

We get a hint of what is expected of those who follow Jesus when we read the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here we see a suffering man who is overlooked by the best and brightest only to be tended to by a despised foreigner. These are glimpses that *everything* in the realm of God will be different.

Furthermore, the realm of God over which Christ rules is not lurking somewhere "out there." It's already here among us, proclaimed by Christ's life, death and resurrection. We encounter this new realm of God today, not only in the Gospels, but in lives of those who seek to follow Jesus. Enlivened by the Holy Spirit, we strive to imitate the Master.

This new realm of God is already here, in our very midst. This means that followers of Jesus presently live in *both* realms. They are citizens of this world and citizens of the spiritual realm that Jesus came to bring into our world.

It is understandable why some people push this new realm of Jesus into the future and perceive it as occurring at the end of the world, and others think it all happened in the past during biblical times 2000 years ago. Either extreme is safer and simpler than holding the tension and the paradox of living in two worlds.

Much of our life is governed by the rules of this world, rules that while they can be improved will never fully usher in the justice and the peace that God has promised. And at the same time, having had a glimpse of the realm Jesus describes, we can never be satisfied with the way things are, never deterred from following the Master and seeking to bring his priorities into the midst of our world today.

Little wonder then, that this understanding of "the realm of God" has not taken hold. No one wants to experience the tension and division that can occur when realm of God that

Jesus proclaimed comes in conflict with powers and principalities of our present day world. If we believe that Christian faith isn't just an allegiance to a different ruler, but rather is the entrance into an entirely new realm, then who knows what God will expect from us.

No longer can we keep our faith a private affair and ignore the need of our neighbor. No longer can we sing robust and rousing hymns about God's glory and majesty and ignore the plight of God's good earth. No longer can we pray that God's kingdom come and yet manage our wealth as if it actually belonged to us, rather than was entrusted to us. And no longer can we relegate the realm of God to a comfortably distant past or future. The realm of God is all around us, beckoning us to live by its vision and values now.

This brings us to today's reading found in Luke's gospel. Here Jesus is on the cross. It's not the place you would look for a king, but then again, nothing is ever quite what you would expect in this new realm. He's in between two criminals. One joins the Soldiers and religious authorities who jeer at him. The other, who has obviously cultivated an interior life, protests and proclaims Jesus' innocence. He asks that Jesus remember him when he comes into his kingdom. It's a humble request, when you think about it. He asks neither to be rescued from his plight or revenged for his suffering. Rather, he wants only to be remembered, to not be forgotten. And how does Jesus respond? He exceeds even the criminal's wildest expectations, declaring that today, now, he would enter with Jesus into paradise.

What kind of king is this, who welcomes a criminal into his realm and promises forgiveness and love amid such agony? It is a king who refuses to conform to the expectations of this world. It is a king who is not content to rule from afar, but rather, comes to meet us in our weakness. It is a king willing to embrace all, forgive all, and redeem all, because that is his deepest and truest nature. That's who he is and who his followers are challenged to be. Amen.