

Luke 23: 33-43

Christ the King Sunday

Rev Margaret

The Gospel reading for this Sunday seems out of place. We are heading for Advent, a period of expectant hope, and here we have a passage on the crucifixion. Don't you find life a bit like that – when you are up- beat, looking excitedly forward, something inevitably happens to pull you back to earth?

So why place this here?

We need to listen more closely to what is happening in the passage.

I want you to transport yourselves back to that day. Place yourself in the scene at the place called The Skull and think about what is happening.

The place is not described here – but can you imagine what a place known as 'The Skull' might look like? What can you hear, what can you smell, how are you feeling?

Luke is not specific about how many people have made it to Golgotha with the soldiers and Jesus, but he talks of an anonymous group of people, he singles out the leaders for their behaviour and the soldiers' actions. And then there are the two men crucified with Jesus. They have gone to a place outside the Jerusalem walls. Golgotha was an oval-shaped old quarry. Where they think Jesus was crucified was in sight of the road in a quiet place where there were tombs and gardens.

Some of us won't want to go there, even in our heads; some may have actually been there in their travels – I would love to go to the Holy Land but I am not sure I could deal with the emotion of actually standing at Golgotha.

In this passage I meet the suffering Christ face to face. Can you see Him? Does He show that suffering? What shines through for me is His love and compassion. Listen to His words. At the end of the passage we hear: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Even in pain and suffering he could turn to the 2nd criminal and tell him he will indeed spend eternal life with Christ. He was answering the man's need. The man had merely asked to be remembered.

Earlier in this chapter – right from the beginning of the journey, Jesus is telling the women and other followers not to weep, and the first words we hear in today's reading are "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He asks for forgiveness for the Roman soldiers who are merely following orders. He doesn't reply to the mockers, or even to the first criminal who tempted him just as the Devil had in the wilderness. In fact, there are three challenges here – echoes of Satan's challenges at the beginning of Christ's journey – his integrity and very identity are being challenged in order to provoke him into behaving as the people wish to see their chosen prophet of God. They wanted their Messiah to act like a Messiah (but their version of Messiah).

Think again about what is happening here. Isn't it when you are at your lowest that you are most likely to challenge God, or your belief in God? But it's you that you are thinking of. When you have been in the depths of despair, feeling totally alone, or in agonising pain – has your first thought been for others? I'm not trying to tell you it should be: that's as bad as telling a depressed person who has the courage to tell you where they are at, to get over it! But it is here we see the message of the Gospel reading. God's love is so great; that abundant generous love was able to see through the pain and suffering to take care of the pain and suffering of others' first. Most of us couldn't do it (and those humans who can have been canonised as saints) but throughout the suffering in this passage Jesus is still thinking of the others; not even people he knows, and even those who are causing his pain.

How was that seen by the people there? Who were those groups of people, Why were they there, how did they feel as they left the place called The Skull?

Who is it that Jesus speaks to? Then and now? How does he speak to them and us? WE don't have to think of parallels today in our lives for the soldiers' behaviour or the criminal's taunts to understand the message here. We know that we are mocked for our churchgoing, for our faith despite the broken world around us; can we discern the difference between those who mock or deride because they are scared of the unknown, and those who mock and bully

because they are powerless themselves and don't understand how Jesus can be so calm? And for those who tell us how foolish we are, that there is no life after death, there is nothing to wait patiently for: what about that small handful of men and women in the first century who have now grown to the force that is Christianity in its many forms across the world. Are we going to accept that 2.3 billion people are all wrong?

Does this passage seem an odd passage with which to commemorate Christ the King? For most of the people there their king has not met their expectations. Yet the dying thief understood. When we think of kings we think of royalty, people moving in a world totally removed from where we are. But the thief addressed him as Jesus. That seems very bold – they may have both been hanging on a cross, but this seems an odd manner of address to someone he then acknowledges as being the head of a kingdom. And he doesn't ask for much – he's not asking for salvation, or release from the pain. He says "Jesus, remember me when you come to your kingdom." This ordinary man, a sinner and lawbreaker, one of the marginalised, has recognised something in Jesus that even his disciples don't see at this moment. There is no evidence in this scene that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, or that he has a kingdom to rule.

How do we recognise the work of God in our lives, or the presence of Christ in our midst? What is special about that person who has had such an effect on you that you start to want to move towards the light? Who was that stranger who unexpectedly smiled and took your bags as you wearily tried to open the car boot? Why did your neighbour take so much trouble to look out for you when he or she has such trouble in their own life?

What the thief represents is that ability to recognise that the moment when it all seems utterly, irretrievably hopeless is the same moment when salvation is the only answer. "Today" as the powers of darkness and violence bring death, Jesus says "you will be with me in Paradise". Not a 24 hour day but as Patrick Willson says – "but the moment salvation fractures time."

We Christians believe in a God who is strong as we are weak, a God who is love and whose Grace is sufficient for all. God is not only our refuge but the

refuge for all those who call on him. Our salvation is not dependent on our priest, preacher, pastor, not even our King but on our loving, grace-giving God. On the day we celebrate Christ as King the message for us is that he is a God of love and his kingdom is available to all who believe in his grace.

Praise Be to God.