

“The King is Dead, Long Live the King”

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Luke 23: 33-43 NRSV

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 in your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Remembrance Day last week was the first time I sang “God save the King”. With the death of Queen Elizabeth in September I had heard it sung, but it was a little weird to sing it myself. I can’t say I loved it, but then we humans don’t like any change. I’m sure I’ll get used to thinking of Charles as a king. At least I think I will. Anyone watching the new season of the Crown? (I’m trying not to go through it too quickly. It’s great television.)

While we are in the throes of Christmas preparations as a church, we officially begin to prepare for Christmas next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent. Before we prepare for the tiny baby to be born, for God to take on human flesh and human form, we look to who Jesus truly is in heaven and on earth. The King of kings, and Lord of lords. The Christ. The Saviour.

It’s funny that as we seek to remind ourselves that Jesus is king, we turn to the least royal and regal place of all: the execution grounds for criminals.

Of course, it was not just his end that wasn’t very kingly – throughout his whole life on earth Jesus did not look anything like a king. You remember that when the magi came looking for a king they went first where you would expect a king to be born: a palace. Instead, he is born in a shelter for animals. He is born to terribly ordinary parents, in a nowhere place. He begins his life as a refugee. He lives his life not in wealth but in poverty. He

never seems to have any money. Do you remember when some of the rulers accuse him of tax evasion he gets a coin from a fish and pays his and Peter's taxes? He lives as a bit of a nomad with no fixed address. He was certainly a leader who attracted many followers, but these were not the 'who's who' but the 'who cares who'.

I can't help but contrast Jesus with Donald Trump. The Globe and Mail compared Trump's announcement of running for president this past week to something out of F. Scott Fitzgerald's book '*The Great Gatsby*'. If you didn't get a chance to read that book in high school or watch the movie, it is set in the 1920's and has an atmosphere of insane wealth and opulence, with no care for anyone or anything else in the world. The announcement for Trump was a glitter-filled event designed to remind the world of how powerful and successful he is. And Trump needs all the props and reminders he can get, because the shiny veneer that covers his true character is beginning to wear off for those who bought into it in the first place.

Let's get away from the phoney and go back to the genuine, found in the worst possible place. Let's go back to the cross. There's an interesting thing that happens here. Not only have they tortured Jesus physically, but those who put him on the cross add to the torment by shaming and mocking him. A sign has been placed on the cross that says "King of the Jews". This is a mocking of Jesus but also a mocking of all Jewish people who believe that one day the Messiah would come. So those around, the soldiers, call out "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!" There is a sense of: 'If you are the king of the Jews...but we know you are not, because a king does not look like you, smell like you, suffer like you, die like you. No, if you were a king, you would save yourself.'

If you were a king, you would have power and you would use that power to save yourself.

Interesting, don't you think? The soldiers and the other criminal on the cross and likely almost everyone else there take it for granted that if they were in the same position and had any power at all they would use it to get out of that situation— to save themselves. The pinnacle of power for them means that you can save yourself.

Certainly, wealth and power do help — I'm sure Donald will use both his wealth and power to save himself from the numerous fraud and criminal charges he is up against. The sad thing is that very rich and powerful people do get away with things that, say, a young, poor, black male would be incarcerated for life for. Having money and power means that you can pay for better healthcare, you can pay for better lawyers and get better justice, you can save yourself from the discomfort of not having enough healthy food to eat, enough decent accommodation, enough respect and decency.

Yes, money and power can buy you more comfort and more physical security ... **but** when it comes to the things that really matter, the truth is we are so powerless to save ourselves.

It's not for lack of trying. I'm a pretty type A kind of person. If things don't work in my life I try harder, I do more, I push more. Don't let me near the kitchen when I'm stressed. I tend to do stupid things that I have no business doing when I'm stressed: I bake. The harder I try, the worse the results are! Still I try to do all the right things, but it doesn't take away the anxiety or the feeling that I'm not enough. *It turns out I can't save myself from myself no matter how hard I try.* Can I get an amen? Anyone know what I'm talking about?

How are you trying to save yourself? Or perhaps your problem is that you keep trying to save someone or something else. Not only do I try to save myself, I keep thinking it's my job to save the church. Sometimes you feel that if you reached out more, sacrificed more, then the other person or the organization or the world would be less of a mess.

The first criminal echoes the soldiers: "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us!" The second criminal is different. Somehow, he had eyes to see, and instead of taunting Jesus, instead of focusing on his present pain — which must have been beyond excruciating— he turns to Jesus for real help: "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*". I can't help but wonder what the difference was between the two. Sometimes I wish we could have some kind of discussion —those of you who are 'Live on YouTube' on a computer or phone could comment in the chat— my guess is it has something to do with total humility. When the ego or the self was removed there was room for that criminal to see truth beyond him. I don't

know. All I know is that a criminal, who in the eyes of their legal system deserved his punishment of death on a cross, found real salvation that day. Jesus says to him; “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” This guy was not saved from suffering, he was not even saved from death, but he was saved from thinking that suffering and death would be the end. He was saved from thinking he was nothing, less than nothing, cursed. He was given eternity *while he was still on the cross* and eternal life thereafter.

Now there is salvation and there is sanctification. Salvation is 100% God’s work. We can’t save ourselves. Only Jesus going through that cross, breaking the power of death through his resurrection can save. But then there is sanctification. Sanctification is how we respond to salvation. Sanctification is saying “I’m going to follow in this man’s footsteps” and walk in a new way — more and more in the way we were created.

Sanctification means that in this life we become more and more like Jesus. While we can’t save the world, as we follow the king we can do so, so much to make this world more like the world God created it to be. Every Sunday we pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” As children of the king we are the ones who help bring heaven to earth, and I would even add heaven to hell.

Jesus, a king like no other king, had the power to save himself *but did not*. Instead, he forgave those around him. He couldn’t rise from the dead carrying the burden of resentments. That’s too heavy a load even for the Christ — and way too heavy for us. Being more like Jesus means we see beyond ourselves to a hurting world.

I am reminded of a woman by the name of Etty Hillesum who also understood that true power did not mean saving yourself, but giving of yourself. Etty was an educated, 27-year old Dutch, Jewish woman at the beginning of World War II. Like Anne Frank, she wrote diaries of her experiences in Amsterdam and in the Westerbork concentration camp. Etty had worked on the Jewish Council which was supposed to be a liaison between the Nazis and the Jewish people. The Jews had hoped that the work of this committee would help to save Jewish lives —unfortunately it had the opposite effect and the Nazis were able to use this group to find and persecute more Jews. Because of her work on this council, Etty traveled from Westerbork to Amsterdam on a few occasions. Each time,

her friends begged her to escape and hide in Amsterdam and not return. But she refused to hide. One of her diary entries reads like this:

“Many accuse me of indifference and passivity when I refuse to go into hiding; they say that I have given up. They say that everyone who can must try to stay out of their clutches. I don’t feel in anybody’s clutches; I feel safe in God’s arms, whether I am sitting at this beloved old desk now or in a bare room in the Jewish district or in a labour camp. And if I should not survive, how I die will show me who I really am”.

Etty walked willingly toward suffering, and it was in walking toward this certain death that she found life. She had an interior living faith — you could even call her a mystic. But it wasn’t just contained inside, for she cared for the well-being of the — as she said — “bundles of human misery, desperate and unable to face life. And that’s when my task begins. It is not enough simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the hearts of others. One must also clear the path toward You in them.”

On September 7, 1943 Etty, her mother, her father and her brother were placed on a transport train destined for Auschwitz. Out of the window of the train, she threw a postcard which was picked up and sent by farmers to her friend. Etty Hillesum died three months later in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943 (79 years ago next week). The postcard read: “We have left the camp singing.” No earthly power could destroy the life that bubbled up within her. No amount of suffering or hatred from the Nazis could separate her from the love of God.

Your faith and mine may never match Etty’s, but it is offered to us.

That is the power and the work of the cross. Because the Son of God chose to suffer and die for us, evil and death will never again have the last word. Evil and death will never again have the victory.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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