

Jesus And Two Criminals

November 2019

Luke 23:33-43 ESV

³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and 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."
³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Introduction:

In Today's first reading from Jeremiah was one of the many denunciations of the Shepherds of Israel to be heard in the Old Testament. The Shepherds of Israel were its Kings who so often did what Kings do - exploit those they are raised to serve.



23:1 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.

Jeremiah speaks God's judgment on Kings who scatter the flock and promises to raise good shepherds who will address the fear of God's people and bring them all together.

Then comes a specific promise

23:5 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Listen to this phrase: "I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king."

Christians in the past and present may hear this as pointing to Jesus raised in mockery on his cross as King and prophetically revealed as the Messiah King reigning in God's name over all that would diminish the people of God and all humanity.

In the three languages that mattered: Hebrew, Greek and Latin, Jesus was ironically mocked with the accusation that had been made against him, namely that he was a King of God's People, the Jews.



The cross was made to be his throne upon which he was raised to present humanity to God. Here he was raised to bear the burden of all that sin has made of humanity created in the image of God. Humanity now disfigured and abused was now bringing that disfigurement and abuse to the one who had been so audacious to uniquely withstand the corrupting power of sin's attempt to tear him away as a son of God. Raised to heaven Jesus was hoisted as a trophy over earth's brutal rejection of heaven's rule. Like the sign over his head, he represented God's reign on earth.

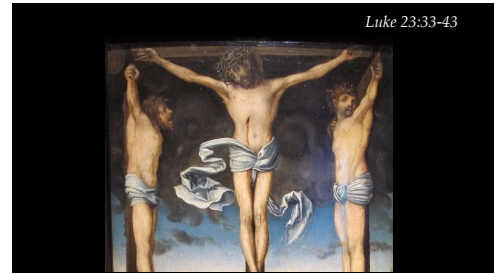
This is the king God provided among his people and all humanity enthroned in torture.

No king had been seen like this. Jeremiah saw earthly kings who drew life from the people and exploited them. King Jesus from Nazareth gives his life for his people bearing himself all that they are afflicted with to restore, redeem and save.

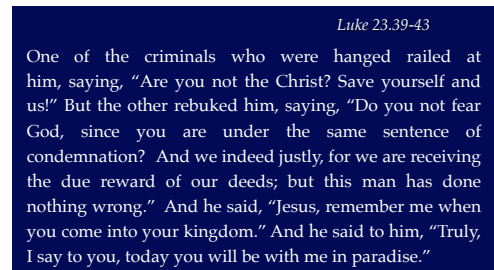
Text

Luke tells us that right unto the end of his life there was dispute about the kingship of Jesus.

Jesus was a condemned political criminal and he was executed with common criminals. This may just have been Roman efficiency but it gave rise to a conversation that continues today.



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A crucified king makes no sense and offers nothing to the first criminal hanging near Jesus. Kings have power. Kings conquer. Kings were considered sons of God with glory in abundance. To him Jesus is a loser. "If you are the anointed Messiah-King act like one by saving yourself and us."

He represents many -then and now- for whom God's salvation was about solving their immediate problems. A man dying on a cross beside him did not look like providing any solution he wanted.

The other criminal dying the same tortured death rebuked him:

"Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

He recognized something of kingship in Jesus and his own need for the righteousness that Jesus somehow revealed as he hung on his cross. He had not deserved this and in his innocence he was exhibiting something he could call out and appeal to. This man beside him was reigning over the power of sin being afflicted upon him even when there was no case to answer for. In Jesus he saw something that this life could not provide as Jesus transcended evil and its hold on every other human - past and present.

Somehow in recognizing Jesus' innocence while the ultimate of punishments was being applied he recognized that Jesus was a King but not of anywhere close by. He was about reigning somewhere else above and beyond the wicked world.

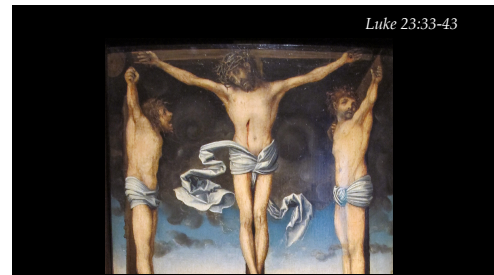
That led him to say:

⁴² "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

This is the contrast to the first criminal who represents blindness to Jesus' victory over all that diminishes, destroys, pollutes, robs and kills.

Jesus, whoever you are and where-ever you are going, Take me with you as one of your own. Let me come with you. May I live in the place where you reign and rule. “Remember me!”

This is for me a moving response to seeing something profoundly alternative in Jesus. He saw the cross as the throne it was with Jesus glorified as the guiltless human for God and others, the king who dies for his flock and invites the flock to share his victory.



This is Christ the King as revealed on his cross at the ‘Place of the skull’. At close range, one dying man saw it, the other dying man could not.

Application

Today two people are going to powerfully enact the prayer of the criminal who recognized Jesus as king enthroned for him:

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

Baptism for them is stepping into a representation of Jesus’ death.

They will not be crucified but after declaring their need for God’s salvation in Christ they will be buried as Christ was buried in consequence of his crucifixion.

They will be buried in water - as if covered by the forces of chaos that have been over come by the Word and Spirit of God.

Their faith is that if they share the death of Christ then they too will share his kingdom in resurrection victory over death and all its leading features and symptoms.

They see the profound work of King Jesus for them on his cross and seek to enter into the royal way that King Jesus walks.

This is what draws people to baptism and what we will now minister to Marthe and Juan.