

“TOO LIGHT A THING”

A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday 2016

Text: Luke 23:33-43

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

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Melanesian Pidgin [from Papua New Guinea, where I served as a missionary for 14 years] is a pragmatic and imprecise language with a tiny vocabulary. However, sometimes Pidgin is more expressive than English, or even the Greek original. For example, in today’s gospel reading one of the criminals on the cross kept making fun of him and saying: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” In Pidgin it goes “Yu Krais, a? Orait yu helpim yu yet, na yu helpim mitupela wantaim.”

If we back-translate that into English, it sounds like this: “So you are Christ, huh? All right, help yourself and help the two of us at the same time.”

The irony of this gibe is clearer in the Pidgin than in the English. How silly, that Jesus would choose this moment, this Good Friday, to save three people. Instead of the world. So sorry, thief whoever-you-are. Jesus is not going to help just himself or the two of you. Why? Because, it would be too light a thing.

Kings always liked to think of themselves not as oppressors but as saviors. They were always using their armies to “save” people. On the coins they made from what they stole from people, they would put pictures of themselves with the word “savior.”

So it was with reason that the criminal being crucified next to Jesus asked Jesus to do what he was anointed to do, . . . what he was born to do, . . . what he had shown his whole life he was capable of doing: Save! Be a savior! Be Christ for us. Don’t just hang there on the cross, do something!

The soldiers had the same idea about Jesus. He was purported to be one who saved. Some people had thought he would save Israel. Save them from Rome. They mocked Jesus on the cross: “If you are the king of the Judeans, save yourself!” After all, the inscription over his head said he was “King of the Judeans.” What do good kings do? Successful kings? They save people. From chaos, from foreign armies, from drought and famine, whatever. Kings save. So, if Jesus was a king, he should save himself.

Well, here is the truth about the king on the cross. He couldn’t get down from the cross to save himself. Or to save the other two men. Because he was dying not for himself but also for the people who were mocking him. Not just for his friends, but for his former friends who had run away. And for his enemies. Saving three people was too light a thing. He was up for something much heavier.

From the beginning of the Gospel of Luke we the readers have been set up for a conclusion which will show that Jesus accomplished what he was supposed to from the beginning:

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

And now, at the end of the church year, we are at the end of the book of Luke, and we are waiting to see how this movie will end. It is a nail-biter. As with any thriller, there comes that moment towards the end when you think all is lost. But you are confident that in the end we will all be okay. Still, the situation is grave. The protagonist, who was supposed to be a savior, has been nailed to a cross. Guards are watching. It looks maybe Jesus was born in the city

of David not to be a Savior but to be a Big Disappointment.

One of my favorite expressions from the Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah is from chapter 49, where the prophet says

And now the Lord says, [to his servant] . . . “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

It is too light a thing merely to raise up the tribes of Jacob. Too light a thing to restore the survivors of Israel. Too light a thing. You are a bigger king than that.

To save himself was too light a thing. To save the two thieves was too light a thing. To save ten lepers, feed five thousand people, to raise up the tribes of Jacob or restore the survivors of Israel? Too light a thing. Any of those options was too easy, not hard enough work. Because Jesus was not sent to be Lord of a faction. Lord of the good people. Lord of the right people.

Jesus was not sent to save anybody from other people. He was given to save us for one another. To create one household of rich people and poor people, so-called “righteous” and so-called “unrighteous,” the Jew and the Greek, the slave and the free. The Kingdom of God does not become the Kingdom of God by driving out people who were here first, but by creating (Paul’s phrase in Ephesians) one people out of two. Ephesians 1:15: “Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.”

It is too light a thing, the Lord says, to save your friends from your enemies, when you were born to save friends and enemies from their division, to create a unity from the whole of humanity.

But how can Jesus possibly save everybody? Because, aren’t other people the problem?

Paul says that Christ was creating in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.

We watch him do it in today’s gospel reading:

What makes a king a king? Subjects! A king with no subjects is no king at all.

Jesus on the cross seems like the antithesis of a king. But from that throne he utters a command that is only in the power of a king. He intervenes in royal fashion and stops the well-deserved judgment of God upon the very people who are executing him. He stops the judgment by saying “Father, forgive them.” When he says it it happens, to any who will receive it. Those people were offered forgiveness on God’s authority, all those complicit in his crucifixion.

Jesus sounds like a king, acts like a king, people listen to him the way people listen to a king, therefore he is a king.

But it happens—Jesus becomes a king to us—when we accept the promise. When we believe we are forgiven.

In the liturgy, you and I express our own willingness to stand under the authority of the king on the cross. We accept the forgiveness, and when we do we acknowledge the kingdom of God, and we step into the kingdom of God.

People who choose to stand under the authority of any other king, people who are willing to be ruled, ultimately, by passions or desires or heroes or principles that are not those of the king on the cross, are losing out on the opportunity to belong to a king who rules not from outside us by force, but from inside us by his spirit. He is our king, and we are his subjects.

“Thy kingdom come,” we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Over and over. And to match those words we come to communion and remember how it was that on

the day of his coronation his first action was to transfer us, despite all that is wrong with us, into his kingdom.

It was hard work, it was not too light a thing, for Jesus to rescue us from the power of darkness. There is still work to be done, because our minds and our allegiances wander. We often act like children of a lesser God. But Paul's prayer for the Colossians is also a good prayer for us today:

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. [For] he has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Amen.

