Christ The King

November 25, 2007

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Today is the Last Sunday of Pentecost, sometimes known as ***Christ The King*** Sunday. You just heard the Gospel reading of the penitent thief who was crucified with Jesus, and found only in the Gospel according to Luke (23:35-43. The heart of today's reading has to do with the exchange between Jesus and those who were executed with him.

Before we get to that, there is a magnificent reading in Paul's letter to the Colossians which set the stage for what is to come later: ***He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. He, himself, is before all things, and in him all things hold together. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,*** and then follows, ***by making peace through the blood of his cross*** (Col. 1:15, 17, 19, 20b). The uppermost becomes the lowermost. The Monarch of the Universe is crowned with thorns and adorned with dried Roman spit on his face. It is the coronation of the corrupt. It's no wonder that one of the criminals

nailed next to Jesus and looking at the inscription over him deridingly says, ***Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself <u>and</u> us*** (Lk. 23:39b).

The interchange between the two criminals next to Jesus holds a key to the efficacy of the Gospel, because Luke's unique vignette reveals the manner in which we handle the brokenness of our lives.

Both criminals, presumably, face death before their time. They are not ***good deaths,*** after a full, fulfilling life. In all likelihood, they are leaving behind their dreams, their families, the very world they have known and, perhaps, even loved. How do they handle their pain, the seeming meaninglessness of their lives, not to mention the terrible humiliation of a public crucifixion?

One of them builds a wall of derision. Whatever Jesus could have meant to the man at this point, is kept out

by a wall of bitterness, disappointment and alienation that, over the years, have hardened his heart into stone. Stone doesn't hurt. Stone is impervious to the pain of feeling abandoned by God, of feeling the grief of going to your death. Stone is impermeable to dashed hopes. Stone is inaccessible to grace. The same wall that keeps the thief safe, is the very wall that keeps him from Jesus. Just as the cross assuredly will kill his body, so also will his hardened heart destroy his soul.

The other thief does something quite different. He reads the inscription over the head of Jesus. Rather than reading it with derision, as a dark joke, he believes it. In his ***death-bed-confession,*** he opens his guilt and pain to Jesus. He does not taunt, he surrenders. He enters into a release that is the essence of repentance. Out of his ***lostness,*** he is found. He takes the scoffing words of the one criminal and finds in them the entry point of salvation.

The difference between his response to Jesus and that of the other criminal is the heart and soul of what it means to be saved. Such a confession of defeat is the only response that truly opens one up to the hallowed mystery of the Gospel experience i.e. the Lordship of Jesus. Either Jesus is the Christ, the ultimate, immoveable ground of our lives, the one alone who can save, or he is not. There is only, as far as I know, one true way to find out: to give this Jesus enough of your life so that the grace of his transforming love may heal you and, eventually remake you from the inside out. When this conversion happens, even if its little by little, as it mostly is, we receive the foretaste of the saving truth the penitent thief found on that dark, terrible afternoon on Calvary's hill: ***Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise*** (v. 43).

AMEN.