

If only . . .

Christ the King Sunday
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46;
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we come to the end of the church year, when we acknowledge Christ as our King, our sovereign Lord, and we are His subjects bound by His rule. That this is so difficult for us to accept lies in the very origins of our nation, which rejected the rule of a king and became a republic. It is fair to say, isn't it, that the option of our having a king is something of an anathema to us?

Even worse, the King that Christ turns out to be is quite the opposite of what we expect earthly Kings to be. For Christ is crowned, not in an elaborate national ceremony proclaiming authority and power, but in a degrading and brutal execution, demonstrating His subjection and powerlessness.

Such a paradox, you know, is not lost on children as an elderly Sunday School teacher was to discover. She was trying to help her class understand what lay behind Jesus allowing himself to be crucified. She retold the gospel story pretty much as we heard it read this morning, though she added some elaboration of her own in an effort to grasp her students' attention and help them understand the profound love of God shown to us in Christ and why Christ submitted Himself to such a cruel death. So off she went with her great story and just as she was reaching the climax, one of the little boys in the class could no longer contain himself and leapt up and shouted out in indignation, "Where the heck were the marines?"

A child's version of our all too human response . . . "Where the heck was God?" For God, if not the marines, could surely have brought His power to bear and saved Jesus from all that suffering and terror on the cross. But had God done that, there would be no hope of salvation for us. The staggering reality is simply this: Jesus was obedient to God's will and accepted the death penalty on behalf of us all, who because of our sinfulness and wickedness, are justly deserving of death since that is the penalty set by God for those who break His law.

Jesus Christ came into the world for one purpose: that we might be forgiven, that we might be made right with God, that we might be saved. Jesus didn't come into the world to found an institution, though we are grateful for this institution which we call the church. He didn't come to impose Western values on the rest of the world, though we are often accused of that. Simply put Jesus came to save the world. The question is, how exactly do we understand what that means?

Jeffery Ginn serving as a missionary to Cali, Colombia, came into his study one morning to find that a map of the world which he had taped to the wall, had fallen during the night. A corner of the map had remained taped to the wall as the rest fell. Jeffrey took the torn piece from the wall and knelt down on the floor to repair the map. At that moment his toddler daughter came in. She plopped on the floor and watched her father intently. Jeffrey's wife had noticed that their toddler wasn't around and had grown very quiet (a warning for all mothers of toddlers), so she called, "Anna, what are you doing?" To which their daughter replied, matter-of-factly, "We're fixin' the world, Mama!"

That's why Jesus came into the world to do – to fix it. Not to build a Christian empire. Not to make the world safe for capitalism. Jesus came to save that which was broken, torn, and lost. This is especially true for those whose crimes and actions are, even on the world's terms, deserving of death. For the truth is, no crime is so heinous that a person is beyond the saving reach of Christ.

It was this fact that was grasped by one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus. Recognizing his own guilt and just punishment he realized Jesus' innocence, but He also grasped the paradox of Jesus' authority and power even as he was dying, subdued and powerless, on the cross. This, the criminal realized, was a King indeed. A King whose reign was to extend far beyond the realm of the Jews, as the sign on his cross proclaimed. The criminal, knowing his punishment was just and well deserved, made no plea for mercy. He asked only that this King, when He finally came into His kingdom, would remember the criminal executed by His side. To which Jesus made the astounding reply, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Paradise, the great garden from which human kind, because of willful disobedience, had been ejected at the beginning and which was soon to be restored. Paradise, the kingdom of Heaven. It is this Kingdom which is offered to us in our baptism when we are adopted as children of God, made princes and princesses, brothers and sisters of the King. The question then must be, how are we to live and act in the meantime? How are we to live as good American citizens, and yet at the same time live as faithful subjects of Christ the King?

The temptation might be to retreat from society and all its problems and live in a closed community, away from it all. But that is exactly opposite of what Christ requires of us. We are called to live in the world while at the same time, as Paul exhorted, not to be of the world. Look how it was done by Jesus. He gathered around him a select group of men and women to carry on his work. There was nothing special about these men and women; in fact, they were like us, they were just quite ordinary. There was only one thing that distinguished them: they were His followers, they were His disciples. And when Christ left them, he gave them a charge, they were to reach out and touch others with his love and compassion; teaching; inviting them into their circle; and baptizing them. Being part of that circle, being baptized, is what it means to be the body of Christ whose task it is to go out into the world as ambassadors, bearing the good news of salvation, and actually living as God's compassionate and forgiving subjects.

We are not an exclusive club, though we do have requirements for membership. We are not a corporation, though we do have to abide by corporate law and regulation. We are not a Bible study society, though the Word is central to our ministry and mission. We are a group of faithful people who gather each Sabbath to worship God, to attend to His word, and receive the sacraments, by which we are sustained and empowered to be those ambassadors for Christ in a fallen world. For this task, Jesus demands our all. He does not want to be sealed off in some area understood to be “religious”, safe, and untouched from what we call “political”. God is not a Republican, He’s not a Democrat, and He’s not an Independent. There is no such thing as a separation of a Christian and the state. God is neither “blue” nor “red”. Whatever our political affiliations, we are first commanded to be a faithful subject of Christ our King. The issues that face our nation are complex and, contrary to public opinion, do not have readily available solutions in scripture. The Bible does not provide us precise guidelines on contemporary matters of politics and state. Quite the contrary, we are left to struggle to find the solutions for ourselves.

This was brilliantly and clearly understood by Martin Luther when he called for Christians to “sin boldly”. In each situation, we may not know exactly the one, correct, “Christian” response, but we respond nonetheless even though we may later discover we got it wrong. For then we have the opportunity to realize the error of our ways, to make amends and corrections where they are possible, and to seek and receive forgiveness and empowerment to think and discern and act once again.

So we work toward solutions prayerfully and as faithfully as we are able. And how, you ask, is that to be done? Perhaps we will gain some insight from an old, old story about a guru who was mediating in a mountain cave. When he opened his eyes, he discovered an unexpected visitor sitting before him, the abbot of a well known monastery. “What is it you seek?” asked the guru. The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous, filled with young aspirants, and its chapel resounded to the chant of its monks, but hard times had come on the monastery. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the aspirants had dried up, and the chapel was almost silent. There were only a handful of monks left, and these went about their duties with heavy hearts.

Now this is what the abbot wanted to know: “Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?” “Yes”, replied the guru, “a sin of ignorance.” “And what might that sin be?” asked the abbot. “One of your number is the Messiah in disguise, and you are ignorant of this”, replied the guru. After saying this, the guru closed his eyes and returned to his meditation.

Throughout the long journey back to his monastery the abbot's heart beat fast as he thought that the Messiah, the Messiah Himself, had returned to earth and was right there in his monastery. How was it that he had failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Sacristan? Brother Treasurer? Himself, Brother Prior? No, not he; he had too many defects, alas. But then, the guru had said he was in disguise. Could those defects be part of his disguise? Come to think of it, everyone in the monastery had defects. And yet, one of them had to be Messiah.

Back in the monastery the abbot assembled all the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible! But he was supposed to be here in disguise. So, maybe . . . What if it were so and so? Or the other one over there? Or . . .

One thing was more than certain: the Messiah was there in disguise. It was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with special respect and consideration and compassion and love. “You never know”, they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, “maybe this is the one.” The result was that the atmosphere of the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the order, and once again the chapel echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks who were aglow with the spirit of love and compassion.

Brothers and sisters of Christ, princes and princesses of the Kingdom, could it be that Christ the King, in disguise, is here today in this congregation? In this nation? In this world? If, if we could live and act as did the monks. If . . .

If only . . .

Amen.