

CHRIST THE KING!

Christ the King Sunday

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Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!

Please listen carefully to our text for today: ***“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Jesus with the criminals. ... And the people stood by watching...”*** (Luke 23:33a & 35a). So far the text!

If you were expected to watch a crucifixion, chances are you would be horrified and shocked by that event even though you might be entirely accustomed to violence and cruelty on TV or in movies. The agonizing shrieks of the condemned men would soon give way to the bone deep moans of torment. Both sounds would be mixed with the wailing distress of friends and relatives, and in the background would be the white noise of the world going about its business as usual. There would be the mess, blood, flies, the smell of sweat and fear and a lot worse.

It's difficult to exaggerate the suffering of a crucifixion, but not very difficult to overdo the description in a sermon. So I will let your minds play upon the spectacle, like 'those people who stood by watching that day'. But please don't forget the identity of the man in the middle, between the two criminals, with ***'the one on his right and the one on his left'*** (Luke 23.33). Remember Him in the context of what was to be written about Him just a short time later. We heard one such passage a few minutes ago; here it is again: ***“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible”... all things were created through Him and for Him. He Himself is before all things'*** (Colossians 1:15-17)

It's a great irony that we Christians have become far too accustomed to the reality that I have just described. We read descriptions of Jesus' crucifixion without realizing or being appalled by the horror. We read about Jesus' divinity without being disturbed by connecting of the two on the cross.

In reality, the crucifixion in and of its own right, like any atrocity, is an immense scandal. It's also an immense stumbling block, because of the true identity of the victim. This is not to imply that other brutal deaths aren't shocking. Of course they are! But with Jesus we see the brutality dished out to the one person we know who lived a perfect sinless life and who is also divine. The victim of that particular atrocity was the man whom later generations learn to call their Lord; the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, the ultimate example of the Good Shepherd. For Jesus was given charge by God the Father to care for the human flock of every generation. The crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate humiliation of human innocence because of His perfect humanity and complete divinity. Without the recognition of that basic and underlying fact, the death of Jesus is merely one among a countless number of murders of good men - and there's no shortage of that crime, even today in our own time.

We can not and dare not try to explain God and His work. The thought process of divinity is, by definition, beyond our perception. Any attempt to explain God and His work throw us back into comparisons with human experience and human intelligence. The very best that we can ever muster, is to say that God is 'like' making God into some type of parable. Only one divine person had the authority and insight to do that. Those comparisons by us are always inadequate and fall short, if not completely off the mark. We do see and experience the reality of God in our lives;

creation, love, forgiveness, and so on, but when it comes to explaining that reality, our words fail and our language becomes inadequate because our thoughts are not His (†) thoughts.

What we do know, however, is that His love and His mercy are unequalled and that they are so much more profound than even our greatest human achievements or ambitions. Even those things we consider our highest areas of human reason and morality like virtues.

All this is obvious, and so the Christian understands that the 'secretively' of God becomes clear to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In Him, the human and the divine are found together in perfect harmony. We cannot fathom such a thought with only human reason.

In Jesus there is - mysteriously - the one and only union of the human and the divine in one person. So when some yelled out at the crucifixion, **'If you are the Messiah .. if you are the King of the Jews ..'** those people spoke more truly than they ever knew. Motivated by hostility, mocking Him, cursing Him, nevertheless, they spoke of a divine mystery - Such a mystery that we some twenty-one centuries later are still trying to understand it and comprehend it. But as I've already said, it is beyond our understanding at this time. For we live in an era of seeing a reflection in a mirror dimly, but even so, we can recognize it for what it is. The cross is the supreme demonstration of God's love for us.

There, on the Cross of Christ, is no higher or greater demonstration of God's love for us. God Himself, in the flesh, Jesus the Son, gave up Himself to that (†) horrible death. That's the crucial thing that makes what happened so utterly significant in human history. The entire 'episode' of Jesus life, the incarnation (*born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, Jesus being a human*), is the point at which the life of God meets with the life of you and me.

What bitter irony, Jesus' executioners put up that notice over the cross, **"The King of the Jews"** (Luke 23:37), and they were right – but only partially so. More accurately they should have put, 'King of Kings and Lord of all'. What they could not know, whoever wrote that notice, was that events had not come to end. The cross wasn't the end of the story, but just the beginning.

Those spectators, those enemies of Jesus thought that they had ended the conflict. After all, the leader of what we might term the 'Jesus Movement' was dead, lifeless, hanging on a cross. He had been put to death by a form of public execution that the Romans had invented and perfected, **'and the people stood by watching'**. It had not been just a Jewish punishment; so even Jesus' manner of dying had strange international connotations. If the sign had said, 'the King of all', that might have been a hint; yet, even then, no one would have guessed how accurate that phrase really was.

You and I know what happened next. The buried body of Jesus had, within the next three days, become the risen body of Jesus. By a divine act which is every bit as mysterious as God's other activities, Jesus the Christ rose from the dead and this - to turning back to our second reading - enables us 'to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. **He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** (Colossians 1:12-13).

This brings me back to where I began. No one could have known the implications of that particular execution, except it seems one of those criminals hanging next to Him! Those who stood and watched may have seen dozens of crucifixions and may even have had their senses dulled by the horror. We have suffered much the same today watching TV pictures of wars far away. If you watch crime shows today they have become ever more grotesque and violent. How offended are you by that violence?

What about our understanding of the crucifixion. Have we become desensitized? We wear our crosses, our shiny empty crosses, almost completely dulled to the pain and torment our Lord's suffering. Even our sanctuary cross is so sterile. Oh we love to make statements like, "Well, we celebrate the risen and victorious resurrected Jesus. So our cross is empty to commemorate that". Or we might say: "We don't want to be like them with Jesus hanging on the cross". Have we watered down the crucifixion?

What about those at the cross that day? Even if that were acutely aware of the awfulness as they were watching, could they have known what was to come? It's the contrast between the reality of the immediate events - crucifixions, pain, despair - and the true reality of the full story which, even today, seems to make faith difficult for many people. And yet, that is the way it is. Out of the darkness and grim brutality of the crucifixion, shines the love of God for you!

In St. John's Gospel we get the concept of Jesus reigning from the cross, and that's the proper understanding, for Jesus our Lord does reign as Savior, Redeemer and Christ the King. In doing so, He reveals the love and mercy which is at the heart of God, but it's love and mercy shrouded in mystery beyond human comprehension, the crucifixion.

The love, mercy and mystery of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is demonstrated in the life and blood of Jesus poured out for you. For Jesus is the Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords, and His blood has paid the price in full for your salvation, so you can be certain beyond any shadow or doubt that all your sins are forgiven for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and Amen!

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
AMEN!*

