

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
November 20th, 2022 – Christ the King Sunday  
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

A member of the congregation recently suggested a sermon topic to me: “what [or who] is God?” My first response to the suggestion was to laugh. How could I possibly answer that question in a few minutes on a Sunday morning? For that matter, how could I answer it at all? Far greater minds than mine have wrestled with this for centuries and not settled on a consistent or complete answer.

But when I thought more about it, I saw that this parishioner's question was very well-timed. Because today is the last Sunday of the church year, the Feast of Christ the King. On this Sunday every year we conclude our reading of the Gospel appointed for the year – in our case today, Luke – and we celebrate Christ, whom we have come to know through the Gospel. We affirm our faith that it is in Christ that we have our clearest and most comprehensible picture of who God is. As St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God.” When we consider the question, “what kind of king is Christ?,” we are, in effect, asking the question, “what or who is God?”

The image of Christ the King found in today's passage from Luke's Gospel is Christ crucified. This is the Messiah, the anointed one of God. We are so accustomed to the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that we need to be reminded of how absolutely shocking it was to proclaim that a man crucified like a common criminal by the authority of the Roman occupiers of the Holy Land in a backwater location in the ancient world was the long-awaited and hoped for Messiah of the Jewish people and – in Christian terms – of all people. Can we imagine a more “powerless” human being? A failure on so many levels? If you have been paying attention to our readings this year, you will see how this image of Christ the crucified King fits so well with the idea which Luke emphasizes, that God's ways are the opposite of the ways of the world.

Jesus on the cross seemed to be powerless, so should we then see God as powerless? No. What we are challenged to do is to re-define power, to contrast the way human beings use power and the way God uses power. During his ministry Jesus often critiqued how some human beings used their power to “lord it over” others. Human nature hasn't changed. Many people continue to use their power to exploit others, to harm and kill others, to grasp what others possess, to treat other human beings as despicable objects, “the enemy.” Jesus reveals that this is wrong. The power of God is seen in love, in self-giving, in service to help the people at the “bottom” of society and others who are afflicted with suffering. The way of God is to heal, not to harm. I think the example of Jesus also shows us the risk involved in using power in that way – the cross. Christ the crucified King loved others all his life, offering himself to God each day, and ended his life as he had lived it – a sacrifice of self-giving love.

The people who crucified Jesus mocked him. It's heart breaking to imagine, isn't it? Here was a man who had done nothing but good in his life, suffering the agony of crucifixion, and suffering mockery as well. “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” We understand that it was by offering himself that Jesus was saving others. If he had cared most about saving himself, he wouldn't have been there on the cross. He had many opportunities to walk away from the dangers he faced at the end of his ministry. But he “set his face” to Jerusalem and his death, to fulfill his mission from God, rather than turn aside and save his own life. In this Jesus

showed astounding courage, the kind of courage the Holy Spirit has given to so many others who have followed and do follow the way of God.

Jesus was crucified between two criminals. One of them also mocked Jesus. Mocked him and at the same time made a bid to get himself saved. "Save yourself andus!" The other criminal rebuked this man with an honest confession: "we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." One criminal remained self-centered and derisive. The other showed humility and from that posture, prayed for recognition. "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Honesty, humility, and reverent prayer are rewarded by Christ the crucified King. In this way Christ reveals what God desires from us.

In this short sketch of what we may learn about the nature of God from the fact of Jesus' crucifixion, we see how God has revealed God's willingness to be affected by the actions of human beings. God is not remote and unmoved by human behavior. God is involved in human life, even vulnerable. God is love. And as we all know, love makes us vulnerable. When we love, we can be hurt deeply. When we love, we allow ourselves to be made known to another, and that carries risks. We believe that God is in a living, loving relationship with all God's children. This faith comes largely from the revelation of God in Christ the crucified King.

Finally, Christ the crucified King shows us how totally God is with us. Jesus entered fully into the life of humanity. God knows what it is like to be one of us. Beginning in the vulnerability of infancy and throughout his life, Jesus knew personally so much of what it is to have a human body, human emotions, human freedom of will. Much of what he didn't know in his own life, he learned as he encountered people whom he healed and forgave. He learned more by observing and thinking deeply about the behavior of people. Jesus was and is "God with us," Emmanuel.

And so, at the end of our church year we anticipate the beginning of the next church year. The season of Advent begins next Sunday, our season of preparation for the celebration of the incarnation of God in Christ. We come full circle. A circle of love revealed in Jesus, from his birth to his death. Love vindicated forever in the resurrection of Christ the crucified King.

As a final word for today on the subject of love, I will take the liberty of passing by the season of Advent for a moment to quote the words of a Christmas poem by Christina Rossetti, "Love Came Down at Christmas."

"Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas: star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead, love incarnate, love divine;  
Worship we our Jesus, but wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token; love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and neighbor, love for plea and gift and sign."

In the holy name of Christ the King. Amen.