

November 24, 2019 - Christ the King Sunday

Luke 23:5-43 - "The King of Criminals and Sinners" - Rev Seth D. Jones ©

The spaces in between are where the light of God, the glow of forgiveness and love, shines forth. Those boundaries where we are crossing over from one landscape to another - beaches, harbors, foothills - are where events and people who are nothing like us or like nothing we have experienced become reflections of who we are and where we are going. Where the river diverts into the swamps and wetlands and ponds, where the water is held for long periods of time from the primary flow, is where life thrives and creatures and plants alike find the opportunity to live again. Then, after a long while, the rains come and the waters rise and the water that has been held in the swamps and wetlands and ponds returns to the primary flow of the river, bringing with it all the nutrients and cleansing and renewal gained from being on the edge, in the liminal space of a strange space.

What place in time and location is more strange than this one - Jesus on a hill outside Jerusalem, on a cross between two high criminals? Luke presents us with this incredible, graphic, grand guignol scene. These scenes of high horror and terror were common practice for the Romans. Crucifixion should be thought of as a public performance of shame, designed to be a warning to others and as an image of shame burned into the family and friends of the crucified for generations to come. This is why the Romans reserved crucifixion for the worst of the worst.

When Spartacus organized thousands of slaves throughout the territory to rebel against their owners, the Roman authorities made sure the rest of the Empire knew about it. Spartacus was a slave and he was the standout gladiator in the coliseums of the Empire. His owner treated him poorly, and Spartacus had enough. He killed his owner and ran into the countryside, where he met up with so-called bandits and brigands, most of whom were escaped slaves. Spartacus was well-trained in the arts of war and was exceptionally well-spoken. He convinced thousands upon thousands of slaves to leave their owners and rebel. His campaign against owners and Rome was a spectacular display of military genius. Over 40,000 men, and probably more, joined his ever-growing band of bandits and brigands and thieves.

Then, in 71 BC, Spartacus was finally defeated. What did the Romans do to the insurrectionists and terrorists and revolutionaries of the rebellion? They lined the main road into Rome with crucified slaves. Every 300 feet was a cross with a slave on it for miles and miles and miles. This is who required crucifixion in the eyes of the Romans. It was a rare punishment, but a thorough punishment when enacted.

And this is why, when you hear the translation ‘bandit’ and ‘thief’ in Scripture, you should hear ‘insurrectionist, terrorist, revolutionary’ instead. And in that regard, it is important to remember why Jesus is here as well. Jesus is the stand-in for the Maccabee, Barabbas, who himself was probably an insurrectionist and terrorist. Jesus is being crucified as a rebel and revolutionary against the Roman Empire.

This is the background and tableau upon which we join these three on the hill. All three are waiting together at that narrow door between life and death, drifting quickly closer to death than to life. Luke doesn’t care about the blood and the gore and the pain of all this. He cares about how it looks, which is what the Romans care about as well. And it looks really bad. The symbolic arena of this, remember, is a performance of shame.

Listen to the way people respond to Jesus in this in-between place. The leaders *scoff* at Jesus (vs 35). To scoff is to give free reign to one’s derision and contempt.

The soldiers *mock* Jesus (vs 36). Here, we see that Jesus has been named the King of the Jews ironically by Pilate. Pilate is mocking Jesus and also the Jewish people at the same time with a sign above Jesus’ head.

A criminal, the one next to Jesus, *derides* him (vs 39). *Are you not the Messiah?*, he sneers, *Save yourself and us.*

The liminal space between life and death is not always gentle, nor is it filled with light and hope and peace. Sometimes it is, but often, at least according to the people who are well-versed in the transition between this life and whatever is next, it is filled with regret, with scoffing at oneself and those who did not do what we wished in this life, with mockery of the unfulfilled dreams of a life less than well-lived, and worst of all, with derision for what could have been and not accomplished. We don’t hear about these times when we speak of death in our culture. Death and the process of dying, the process of navigating that in-between space, in our culture, has been privatized, white-washed, medicalized, driven into unconsciousness.

But when we are awake to that in-between space, that swampy wetland between life and death, we can see what gets drawn forth in those moments. For Jesus, that place draws forth all the resistance to what he has proclaimed in his life on earth.

Jesus said a lot while teaching the disciples and others, which, I remind you, were probably hundreds of people, not just 12. But what he offered is encapsulated in this scene on the hill called The Skull.

Before we look at what Jesus offered, let's take a moment and bring to mind the places in our lives where we

- scoffed at others who were suffering inside*
- mocked others, especially from the safety of power and distance*
- and most of all, derided others for what they were expected to do, but would not or could not do*

Think also on those times where

- you were scoffed at during a difficult time in your life*
- you were mocked when you were vulnerable and disempowered*
- and most of all, where derision, scorn and contempt was showered upon you because of personal failure*

Do you have that in mind?

Good.

Let that experience, either side of it, pierce you and let it go through you. In doing so, we join, even if only for a moment, the insurrectionists and terrorists on the hill with Jesus. We enter into the in-between space, the liminality of possible, likely, and imminent death.

And what does Jesus do when we first join him on that hill, that place where the water of life diverts into the terror and despair of the swamp of shame?

*Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing."*

This, O suffering follower of the Lord, is the evidence of *our* King. While other world leaders are handing out special favors and making deals in back rooms, while other leaders are signing laws that mete out contempt and derision, while other leaders put on a face of diligence and compassion and in the background make bargains with autocrats and dictators, our King forgives from a cross.

One terrorist mocks Jesus for his ironic status as King of the Jews. *Save yourself and us*, he says. Irony in satire is the great leveler of kings and rulers from time immemorial. But when the ironic becomes the vehicle of communication among the common people, meaning is undermined and truth is sabotaged at every angle. Now, comedians and satirist become the speakers of truth to the people, rather than the journalists and the people elected to serve the country.

To maintain one's cultural sense of irony and mockery, even from the pain and suffering of a cross, is a profound effort of will and ego.

But for the one who recognizes the space in-between, that on the chasm between dying and death we are confronted with not only the life we have lived, but the life to come as well, then irony, mockery, and derision melt away, until the sign hung ironically above this Jesus character becomes a signing of the truth of the matter.

*But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?...This man has done nothing wrong." (vss 40-41).*

Then the revolutionary says to the crucified one next to him,

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.*

The ironic King of the Jews has become for the dying man the one true King of his future. Now the irony is flipped, for the one who suffers in in-between spaces, who stands in for those accused against Empires, who speaks outrageous things on behalf of God above, is shown to be the True King, a King in the eyes of a criminal, in the eyes of a terrorist.

Think again of the situation I asked about above, where you mocked, derided, and scoffed at someone, or were mocked, scoffed, and derided yourself. Where do you seek your assurance and hope in such a situation? Who is the king of your world?

As we all hover between life and death, and sometimes join criminals and sinners on the hill, and suffer the shame of failure and the grief of rejection, ask of Jesus what this man rightly accused asks of Jesus today,

*Remember me, Jesus, as we await your Kingdom. Remember me, Jesus, for you are my one and true King, the King of Sinners and Criminals. Meet me, Lord and Savior, in the space between myself and the future you have promised.*

The great act of our King from his enthroned Cross is the word of God's forgiveness for you and for all. It is there for us to witness and accept, without irony, mockery or derision. And in accepting, let us join the revolutionaries, insurrectionists, and bandits on the hill beside Jesus, and wait to hear the words he speaks.

*Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*

Amen.