

Christ the King, 2022

We say that Jesus died for our sins, and that is true, but some have made of this a kind of economic exchange in which Jesus paid a price to God, as if God, the almighty, required a gruesome death in order to forgive us.

We do not need to purchase forgiveness from God.

To say that God demanded a blood price makes God seem like a weak, mercenary sadist.

It is in *God's gracious and loving nature* to forgive everyone who is sincerely repentant.

When we say that Jesus died for our sins, we mean that he had options.

He chose to stay the course to the very end in order to show us what love is.

He taught us about the nature of love even to the point of making his witness in the face of mortal opposition.

As hostility increased, Jesus could have responded to the lack of faith that he saw in his disciples and in what he called the generation of vipers by simply leaving Israel, by giving up and moving to Egypt.

He could have abandoned his mission of teaching us what it means to put relationship first and instead put himself first, but giving up would undermine that message.

People would have said, "You see, all that talk about love meant nothing. As soon as things got difficult, he abandoned us. Everyone does."

The lesson learned would have been to do what is convenient, to put self first.

It would leave us hopeless, doubting that love is even possible, so Jesus followed his path to the very end, remaining present to all.

Even as he faced a torturous death, Jesus therefore refused to reject others, but forgave them for their ignorance—“they know not what they do.”

In the end, you see, most of his contemporaries saw him as a criminal and gave him a criminal’s death between two other criminals.

The one criminal scapegoated right to the very end.

Hanging there on a cross, he acted as if he had it all figured out.

He refused to identify with Jesus in his suffering, but chose to look down on him to make himself feel superior.

Maybe, like many, the abuses he had witnessed in the world had caused him to give up on the very possibility of relationship.

He had given up on hope, on love, on God.

We have a lot in common with this one.

I do not think you will have to think hard in order to remember times that you were used, ignored, put second, third, or fourth.

In response, we are good at making it look like we have it figured out, have everything under control, but all God wants from us is that we connect our hearts.

We expend a lot of energy in maintaining this illusion, but in reality, life is very messy for everyone.

Sin is ignoring this reality, pretending that we need no one, that we are superior and in control and have it all figured out as we hide our hearts behind our opinions.

Sin divides us from one another and tears us apart inside.

Christ invites us to be more like children, playing, exploring, learning, under no illusion that we have control.

Control is the purview of God.

Rather than pretend there is no mess, the best we can do is to walk together through the mess.

Christ incarnated as Jesus to teach us this, and now works through us to invite others into relationships of respect and love.

We are the ones in the world who carry on Jesus' message.

It is our role to witness to others by connecting our hearts.

I sometimes hear people talking about *those people*.

It does not matter which group *those people* are.

The attitude is the same whether the target is southerners or northerners, Democrats or Republicans, gay or straight, black or white, or anything else.

It is the same attitude of superiority based on the illusion of having everything figured out.

We do not.

As soon as we think we have, something unexpected happens to teach us otherwise.

We grope half blindly through life and depend on others to accompany us.

In the end, when we face God, God is not going to give us a twenty-page test on our opinions, our theology, our philosophy, on Coke vs. Pepsi, east coast vs. west coast vs. middle, northerner vs. southerner, pine straw vs. bark, or pumpkin vs. sweet potato.

This is not what matters.

God is going to ask us, were you there for people?

Did you feed my sheep?

Did you draw people in, or push them away with rigidity, arrogance, and the pretense that you knew everything?

The second criminal had a change of heart—repentance, metanoia.

He took responsibility for his actions, announced that he deserved his punishment, and asked Jesus to *remember* him.

That is key.

He did not ask for forgiveness.

He had already taken responsibility for what he had done, had already admitted his failures.

He asked to be remembered.

That is, he wanted to continue a relationship with Jesus—remember me.

That is all that it takes—acknowledgement of one’s own truth—good and bad—and a desire to be in relationship.

Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with *me* in Paradise.”

Don’t worry, in other words, our relationship will continue.

The centrality of relationship is obscured when we make Jesus’ death into a blood payment.

Reconciliation and healing, as happened with the second criminal, is at the center of the church’s mission.

We gather together at the Eucharist not just to be *reminded* that we are all in this together, but to *experience* our unity, to support one another, and to gain strength to invite others into this same relationship, others whose lives are also messy and with whom we surely disagree about some things.

It is the commitment to one another that matters.

We are not asking people to believe a dogma, in other words, but to believe that healing and reconciliation are possible, that relationships of profound trust, though sometimes challenging, are a real thing, as Christ our King taught us.

Christ is our king—a king of humility and compassion, not grandeur and power.

Christ's authority resides in love, not force, in presence, not superiority.

That is, our relationship with Christ, not with money, not with sex, not with fame or any of the other things people place first, but with Christ is the most important.

We proclaim this mostly through our behavior and attitudes.

We *know* that suffering does not mean an absence of God, but is an opportunity for us to support those who are suffering.

We *know* that salvation does not mean being protected from challenges, from the messiness of this world, but learning how to face them together.

Jesus himself was not protected.

We worship Christ crucified.

God does not save us from reality, but from being alone.

As the followers of Christ, we are to do the same.

We are to go out into the world, into the mission fields, and bring people into relationship, to teach them that it is possible, to invite them into the salvation path with us, where we are being saved together.

The church—the body of believers—is to be a safe place to share one’s heart, and we are to invite others into sanctuary.

We are inviting them into a life of prayer, into a life of being present to one another.

This is what it means to proclaim Christ our King.