

Christ the King, 2019

Jesus is on the cross and he notices Peter. He calls out and Peter answers: yes, master I am coming to you, and runs up the hill. The Roman guard sees him, cuts off his arm and kicks him back down the hill. A little while later Jesus calls again and Peter runs up the hill only to have the Roman guard cut off his other arm and kick him back down the hill. The day has worn on and Jesus, about to die, calls out one, last time and Peter, sensing his death, conjures all his strength to serve his master. The guard sees his condition and lets Peter pass. Finally, he reaches Jesus and says: yes master I am here. How may I serve you? And Jesus answers: Peter, I can see your house from here...

What a terrible joke for the feast day of Christ the King. But in Peter's undying devotion we see a central theme for today: undying devotion to Christ the King as a way of life. But first, the cross. How many of us have walked into an Episcopal church and seen behind the altar the image of Jesus Christ on the cross but dressed in royal garb? You may have noticed he has the marks in his hands and feet and that he is not entirely attached to the cross. It's a paradoxical image. This is an artistic rendering of Christus Victor.

In the Anglican tradition most hold to an idea that came to be known in the early 20th century as Christus Victor. This was not new to Christianity nor even to Anglicanism but it was discussed eloquently and convincingly by a Dr. Gustaf Aulen. A professor of Systematic Theology, he delivered a series of lectures in 1930 which attempted to call European Christianity back to its origins. Medieval Christianity had brought us into a way of understanding the cross that was unhealthy and led to the Reformation because of the abuses it spawned. Returning to the classical idea that we find in much of the New Testament and in the early Church like Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Irenaeus, the meaning of the cross begins in the incarnation: God was pleased in man to dwell. Because of this, the central meaning of the cross is that we are reconciled to God only through the fact that God is simultaneously, in the person of Jesus Christ, the Reconciler and the reconciled.

To understand what it means that the crucifixion has meaning in context of the incarnation, Colossians is a helpful passage today. The heart of this passage is verse 1:15, which tells us that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God." What we can know about a God that is beyond our sight, is seen in Jesus. This Jesus is the firstborn of creation, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him, and Jesus has rescued us from the power of darkness. It is very reminiscent of the prologue to John: in the beginning was the Word... Both passages explain the divine nature of Jesus Christ – the incarnation. So from primitive Christianity, the notion of Jesus being fully human and fully divine has been part of the faith practice. Moving from the incarnation to the crucifixion, we acknowledge that because humankind has no power in ourselves to save ourselves, God must do the work. This work is accomplished in the cross by one who is fully human and fully divine.

This is what has made Christianity unique in the history of religious thought. We understand the victim to be the one who has conquered. It's a paradox central to who we are as a people. It is what makes Christ the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. Of course, a king or any strong leader shouldn't be killed but is the one doing the killing. How can a person win if that person has lost? Think of the last time you really wanted to throttle someone. What was really going on? Wasn't

it really that you wanted to squash a kind of pain whether it be the complexity of resolving differences in a relationship, the frustration of not being able to convince another to see something your way, whatever it may be, almost all violence comes from anger and is a reflection of one's own self rather than a healthy reaction to a real problem. James chapter 4 says this: *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but you do not have so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.* So violence is ironically a form of weakness. Even Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* says that a failure of diplomacy leads to war.

In the crucifixion we see Jesus being the King of all Kings and Lord of all Lords because he was able to resist perpetuating violence. Even though he had many followers who expected him to overthrow the Roman oppressors, Jesus lived a higher way which didn't look for a solution to one conflict but to all conflict. Jesus demonstrates a way of life which doesn't overthrow an oppressor but teaches us never to oppress. If we were all willing to suffer with or suffer through rather than crush anything that caused us any form of suffering, we might ironically greatly reduce our suffering. Individualism, which Americans have mastered, is a symptom of our fear of suffering. Relationships require us to suffer with others, but seeing ourselves as individuals and organizing our lives and approach to life through this lens allows us to be off the hook. Ironically, this feeble attempt to reduce our suffering causes greater suffering through rampant commercialism, billionaires with no concern for others, wars for profit, and a deep sense of loneliness in a society more connected through technology than we have been in the history of humankind. We cannot do away with suffering but Christianity makes meaning of it: we suffer because we love – we love life, we love our selves, we love each other. We see this love in the crucifixion which does not eliminate suffering but sanctifies it.

On this feast of Christ the King we might pause and wonder about Christ as ruler of all. Where in our lives have we not allowed Christ to reign over us? Our finances? Our voting? Career choices, relationships? How has not allowing Christ to rule in our hearts caused us to miss out on all that life has to offer? Since Jesus has sanctified suffering on the cross have we been courageous enough to suffer with others who may have less or who find themselves in pain or distress? Or have we run from such things hoping to create this world's notion of the perfect life? It is a challenging faith practice we have. Its meaning is found in a crucified savior. It asks us to find life in sacrificing ourselves.

Thinking of the notion of Christus Victor, I can't help thinking about athletes who train with one goal in mind. Waking up early then going to work or school after practicing or exercising. Then practicing and training again so they achieve the goal. Working through pain and making a commitment which doesn't allow time for other things. And after all that work and focus, and agony, achieving the ultimate goal of victory. Christ's victory over sin and death opens for us the way of infinite life. It is the way of the cross. It is the way of personal sacrifice for the sake of the other. This is the only way to complete and total victory. Game on.