

“Remember Me”
Christ the King Sunday
Luke 23:33-43
25 November 2007

[In Memory of Blanche Hester Parsons, 1926-2003]

Have you made your New Year’s Resolutions yet? “Oh, please!” you say, “our tummies are still full of Turkey and we haven’t even begun to think about Christmas; we couldn’t possibly contemplate New Year’s!” Well, in the rhythm of the church calendar, the new church year begins next week with the first Sunday in Advent, and today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. It is designated “Christ the King” Sunday. That explains the lectionary texts chosen. Each one deals with the theme of Kingship. Psalm 46 celebrates the reign of God who “makes wars cease to the ends of the earth and breaks the bow and shatters the spear.” Jeremiah prophesies about the day when God “will raise up . . . a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.” And the Colossians hymn celebrates Christ’s cosmic reign; he is the “glue” who holds the universe together and for whom it was created.

The Gospel lesson from Luke, too, on first glance, looks as though it supports this theme of kingship. The penitent thief, after all, does say to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your KINGDOM.” But upon further reflection, we see that actually the verse does as much to subvert conventional notions of kingship as to support them. In the immediate context of Luke, Jesus’ kingship is used to mock him not exalt him. At the beginning of the chapter, the mob brings him before Pilate and says, ““We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.” (23:1). Later as Jesus hangs dying, his executioners taunt him: “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”” Above his bloody head is displayed a sign, which reads: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” Even one of his fellow victims mocks him, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

What must those watching have thought about the criminal’s request? Perhaps the hardened executioners chalked up the lunacy to exhaustion or loss of blood. How could one man hanging on a cross possibly think another man hanging on a cross was about to inherit a kingdom--both of them victims of the most shameful and humiliating form of punishment the Romans could think of (and they thought about it a lot!). The gibbet was the place of messianic pretenders, not real Messiahs! To hear one crucified man turn to another crucified man and ask him to be remembered when he comes into his kingdom is ironic at best, and laughable at worst. It’s pure comic relief, a Monty Python, *Life of Brian*, irrereligious kind of moment: we resist the urge to turn aside and snicker sacrilegiously. We wouldn’t be surprised to hear “Look on the Bright Side of Life” playing irreverently in the background. So they turn away--WE turn away--not able, really, to believe what we hear.

But *this* criminal *believes* what he said; it’s not IF you come into your kingdom as though he were covering his bases, just in case. It’s WHEN you come into your kingdom. His request, based on that belief, is simple. “Remember me.” “Remember me.” These words stand in sharp contrast to what James and John, two of Jesus’ closest friends, had asked earlier in the Gospel story when they came to the same conclusion that Jesus was

going to inherit the Kingdom. They come to Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Time out for a Pedagogy 101 Lesson! Aspiring teachers and young parents, take note! The only proper response to such a request is the response Jesus gives: “What is it you want me to do?” “Lord, when you come into your glory, grant us to sit on your right and on your left!” In other words, “Jesus, when you come into your corporate kingdom, we want corner offices in the reign of God!” Now don’t be too hard on James and John, and don’t think that they represent an aberration in attitude among the disciples. At the end of that story we read that when the ten heard about it they became indignant with James and John. Why? Because they understood how inappropriate was the request? NO, because James and John had jumped the gun; the other ten intended to ask for the same thing. The sons of Zebedee had just stolen their thunder!

To this unbelievably brazen request Jesus responds with a question: “Are you able to drink the cup which I must drink, and be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?” And they reply, glibly, “We are able!” And then Jesus says, “You will indeed drink my cup of suffering and experience my baptism of death, but to sit on my right and on my left is not mine to give. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.” (Mark 10:35-41). And who are those for whom these places have been reserved? We learn in our text today: The ignoble “honor” of sitting on Jesus’ right and on his left belongs to those with whom he is crucified, one on his right, Luke says, and one on his left. His throne is a splintery cross; his crown made of thorns. His glory comes only by way of his slow and tortuous suffering!

This criminal, despite suffering his own unimaginable pain, believes with all his might that Jesus is King. He doesn’t say, “Jesus, we’ve been through a lot. When you become the king, let me be your Junior executive.” He does not demand, “Give me”; he simply begs, “Remember me.” No privileged sense of entitlement, “Give us,” “Grant us”; rather a simple plea, “Remember me.” The thief’s words sound nothing like the disciples and everything like Jesus himself.

Like the disciples, Jesus, too, sees the end coming. But unlike the disciples, he recognizes that his exaltation will come only when he is “lifted up” on the cross. And so on the night before he dies, in what turns out to be his last conversation with his friends this side of his Resurrection, he takes bread and wine and says, “When you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me.” “Remember me.” In these words, both the penitent thief and Jesus recognize one of the strongest of human urges, the deep desire to be remembered.

My mother died of lung cancer a little over four years ago. In what turned out to be our last conversation this side of the Resurrection, I asked her if she was afraid of dying. “I’m not afraid of dying,” she said, “but I am afraid of being forgotten.” “Forgotten by God or by us?” I asked. “Both,” she replied. Facing death, Jesus entreats his disciples, “Remember me!” Facing death, the penitent thief entreats Jesus, “Remember me.” And so we turn away again, this time not to stifle a scoff, but in embarrassing recognition that we are standing on Holy Ground, we have opened a door and are witnesses to a moment of intense intimacy between a dying sinner and his dying Savior.

The ministry of memory is a sacred calling entrusted by Christ to the Church. In a culture that is better at remembering the Alamo than the Almighty and in a denomination

that suffers from chronic spiritual and historical amnesia, we are called as the body of Christ to embody the memory of Christ's words and actions in *our* words and actions. We are called, first of all, to remember each other. Years ago, I attended my first Easter Vigil at a Catholic Mass. At one point in the liturgy, the priest took a hyssop branch and, dipping it in Holy Water, walked around the sanctuary, flicking water on the congregants and repeating, "Remember your baptism!" "Remember your baptism!" "Remember your baptism!" On the way home, I, thinking as a Baptist I had at least gotten this one right, commented, rather smugly, to Heidi: "You know, I was probably the only one in church today who COULD remember his baptism." She said something like, "You Baptist dummy! We remember *each other's* baptism. It is an act held in the collective memory of the church." Her words hit me like a ton of bricks; however much we Baptists have gotten the mode right with its emphasis on individual choice and regeneration, how often we miss out on a deeper, corporate meaning--we are called to a ministry of memory! The church is called, in the language of Harry Potter's world, to be the Pensieve, the depository of sacred and collective Christian memory.

Jesus said, "Remember me." But how do we do that? We remember Jesus, of course, in our corporate worship and in our prayers and meditation and in our slow and deliberate reading of the Scriptures that bear witness to him. But we also remember him in our actions. "When you have done it to the least of these," Jesus said, "you have done it unto me." So when we offer a cool cup of compassion to the throwaways of our society, when we wade into the mighty waters of justice on the side of the oppressed, when we extend living streams of salvation to those who are lost, we remember Jesus.

For to remember Jesus is also to remember the penitent thief and all those like him who have been cast aside onto the places of the Skull, the dump heap of our culture. It is to remember each other; for in so doing we are re-integrated into the community; we are *re*-remembered into the body of Christ. It is to remember, ultimately, the God who by his grace has called us and saved us.

The thief got so much more than he asked for, didn't he? "Jesus remember me." Jesus responds, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise could just as easily be translated as "Garden" and not just any old garden but THE Garden, since it is the same word used of the Garden in the Greek version of Genesis. It was common among first-century Jews to think that in the end times, God's Righteous Ones would return to the Garden (1 Enoch 61), the place in which humans *first* forgot who they were in relation to God, to each other, and to the created order. So the return to the Garden, Jews thought, was to remember and to be re-ordered and restored and to really "know the place for the first time" (Elliot). Here, the Lukan Jesus echoes that theme, adding that the thief's return to the Garden would happen immediately - "Today" - and that he would be in the company of the New Adam, Jesus the Crucified and Risen One. And it is Christ's presence—being with him—finally, that is most important. I like what St. Thomas Aquinas said about this verse: The presence of Christ could transform any place, even Hell, into Paradise (*Summa*, 3a.57).

"Remember me," Jesus said, "when you eat this bread and drink this cup." To partake of the Lord's Supper is to participate in what James McClendon has called a "remembering sign." God acts to make his presence known to those who participate in the remembering sign of baptism, or the remembering sign of the word preached, or the remembering sign of the paschal mystery of the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper, we

experience the real presence of Christ as we remember the past; and we remember the past not to get stuck in it, but to prepare for the future. So in a significant way, we also remember the future: “whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). We remember that just as “in the beginning, God,” so “in the end, God.” And by remembering the future and proclaiming the Advent of Jesus, we experience his life-giving presence. Therefore, on the threshold of a new Church year, let us resolve through participating in this remembering sign that, with God’s help, we will fulfill our vocation to “remember” and to proclaim, through our word and deed, Christ’s dying love until he comes.

“Remember me,” Jesus said, “when you eat this bread of life and drink this cup of our salvation,” and “today, in this moment, around this table, with others who receive this remembering sign, you will be with me, and you will have have a foretaste of Paradise.” Remember me,” says King Jesus and sing praises to His Name; He “forgets not his own!” Amen and Amen.

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