

Christ the King Sunday

“THE CROSS AS CORONATION”

Luke 23:33-43

Christ the King Sunday (Proper 29)

Analysis by Kris Wright

33When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ 38There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ 39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ 40But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ 42Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ 43He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

DIAGNOSIS: Come Down and Save Yourself

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Complaint*

They came to Skull Place, and they crucified Jesus with the

criminals. The charge hung over his head: "This is the King of the Jews." The Roman's played games; the soldiers mocked; toasting him with sour wine, the leaders scoffed, "Save yourself." And the people stood by watching. None of them saw the sign of a king there. No display of power, no glory, no sign of salvation, no future. Any king worthy of the title, worthy of honor would save himself. This one did nothing. And the people stood watching and seeing only humiliation and death; no hope, no promise.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Demand (The Arrogance of Unbelief)*

There is another one at Skull Place who also derides Jesus, "Aren't you the Messiah? Then act like it! Save yourself and us!" Implicit in his demand for salvation is a condemnation of Jesus for failing the Messiah test – that is, Jesus doesn't act like a rescuer who will give the thief what he thinks he deserves. That arrogant fearlessness characterizes all unbelief, ours as well, though we may disguise it better. As Robert Capon points out, people have always wanted a Messiah in cape and tights who will swoop down and rescue them just in the nick of time. A Messiah who suffers alongside is no Messiah at all. A king without power to save himself can't be my king. There is no fear in rejecting this Chosen One of God because there is no need to fear a God who is impotent to save him. (Especially in our arrogant American theology where God is duty-bound to bless America.)

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Condemnation*

There is one more who speaks at the Place of the Skull. The second criminal sums up the dire situation: "You are under the same sentence of condemnation And, indeed, we have been justly condemned. We are getting what we deserve." (Not what we'd like to think we deserve.) The rejection, the demands, the scoffing and mocking, even the watching leave all condemned in the sight

of God. Condemned not to be remembered (re-membered) when King Jesus comes into his kingdom, not to be with him in paradise today or any day. Left behind.

PROGNOSIS: Come Into Your Kingdom and Save Us

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Promise*

The turning point. The second “crossed” criminal continues his dialogue, but now turns his attention to Jesus: “This man has done nothing wrong.” And yet Jesus is condemned with us and for us. That condemnation which was against us is now for us because of who it is that hangs in there. It is not just another criminal, but the Christ, the King—not only of the Jews, but all of creation, he is the Chosen One of God. And he speaks only two words from the cross, both on our behalf: “Father, forgive them” – they have no idea what is happening here, and “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” Both words that promise to re-member us with God, both words that turn the cross from an instrument of humiliation and death into one of coronation and life. Mercifully for us Jesus’ refusal to save himself saves us instead. We get not what we deserve, but what he deserves.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *The Confession (Audacious Chutzpah)*

Again the second criminal speaks for all who, having been forgiven, now see with new eyes the power hidden in weakness, the ironic truth of the sign of the cross, “This is the King of the Jews” (and of all who stand in the shadow of the cross). And only in that shadow are we able now to confess, to plead, to pray with confidence, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Response*

And so, now there is no more mocking or scoffing, no more demanding our “just due.” Now we do know what we are doing, or better, what has been done for us. Now we are called “children

of the King.” We can be signs of the cross, signs of Jesus’ forgiveness and salvation; we can be signs of hope and promise, signs of the new kingdom inaugurated on the cross.