

Christ the King Sunday

Hey King! Don't Just Hang There, DO Something!

Luke 23:33-43

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

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: Getting Things Done in This World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Doers

Who of us hasn't wished that we could be "king" for even just one day? Just think of the things we could DO if we possessed unlimited authority and power. Think of the justice we could ensure, the wrongs we could right, how we could/would make life better for everyone by redistributing wealth (granted, it would be by force). In short, think of all the people, including ourselves, we could SAVE! Interestingly, the word "save," appears four times in this short pericope. It's an action word. Kings DO things—like SAVE people and kingdoms. This is why Jesus so disillusioned everyone—the leaders, the people, the soldiers, even his disciples—and gets mocked by them. He just doesn't seem to DO anything, like save himself. Such pathetic inaction seems to contradict any possibility of his being king.

Nowadays, we experience the same disillusionment when Jesus fails to DO what we want him to do for us, say, get rid of our cancer or find us a job, or protect us from natural disasters. If he's king of the cosmos, why doesn't he DO something about this world-mess, not to mention our own life-messes? Why doesn't He SAVE us the way we want (expect!) him to save us?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Saving

We get caught up in DOING because inside us all abides an innate conviction that it IS possible to save ourselves, if only we had just a little bit more power, or if only we tried just a little harder, or if we could only hook ourselves up to a super-king. Such an arrogant assumption really has a rational basis: it's the way, or the "rules of the road," by which we all operate. Paul called it relying on the Law. Deep down, we believe the Law is the means by which we can climb the ladder not just among peers (as we scramble to get to the top of our power-pyramids), but also up to God (called justifying ourselves). The thief next

to Jesus articulates such thinking when he acknowledges, “we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds” (v. 41). That’s tit-for-tat, rewards and punishments.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Cursed

So captivated are we by the Law that we don’t recognize that that’s exactly what we are—captives! Yet, we can’t give it up, we love it dearly; it’s an integral part of our nature. What doesn’t sink in that our beloved Law can NEVER be the means by which we can endear ourselves to God, or, more succinctly, save ourselves. In fact, it always winds up being exactly the opposite: the means by which we are criticized and critiqued by God, which makes it a curse for us. Think of the serious ramifications. If living with God is paradise, then being separated from God, cursed, must be hell—literally, that radical (and final) disconnect from love and life.

PROGNOSIS: Getting Things Done in the Kingdom of God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Jesus Saves

And yet, as both of them hang dying, Jesus promises the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43). Paradise. Salvation! Here’s the Big Surprise, the great turn-around: with his pathetic “failure,” Jesus was in fact *doing* something—something really big, something extraordinary! Namely, he was doing exactly what kings DO: He was SAVING people, (all us) cursed, stubborn Law-trusters. Yet another surprise: The way he *accomplishes* this monumental “saving” is, (instead of performing heroic deeds), he absorbs all the consequences of the Law into himself and allows it to destroy HIM. He is cursed. Watching Jesus is watching *God* absorb the offenses of the world into himself in order to suffer them out of existence. On Easter morning, God takes charge and raises

Jesus, proclaiming him “king” of the cosmos. This abruptly abrogates the Law.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *New Operating System*

The new ruler (king) gets to establish the political system (reign) of his choosing which he calls the “kingdom of God.” It functions very differently from the way the old order worked: rather than being based on justice and rightness, the KoG is based on mercy and forgiveness. Recall, Jesus had articulated its rubrics when he prayed, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34). Law-trusters get to become citizens of this new kingdom simply by doing what the thief did -that is, turning to Jesus, asking and then trusting HIM to be his king (the equivalent of salvation): “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Unremarkable Yet Powerful Deeds*

What do you know? Citizens of Jesus’ kingdom find that their king gladly shares his power with them. Yet here too, just as Jesus’ power seemed quite unspectacular, so often does the “power” that Christ-trusters wield. When it “appears” that they/we are just not DOING enough to “make a difference in the world” (like crusading for peace and justice), perhaps it’s because they/we are inconspicuously and unremarkably absorbing each other’s woundedness and sins into themselves/ourselves in order to get rid of them once and for all. With such unspectacular inaction, paradise slowly spreads throughout the world.