

LUKE 23:33-43
WHAT KIND OF KING?

The wonderful Riding Lights Theatre company based in York once performed a sketch about the first person into heaven. We were introduced to the angel in charge of the gate, ex-RAF officer complete with twirly moustache; he was walking about nervously, wondering aloud who would it be! Who would be first? Was he expecting someone famous? Or someone who had done extraordinarily good works in the world? Or someone who had spent their life in the service of God and what is good in the world? Imagine his horror when the first person through the door was a thief! He was dirty, bloodied; he was frankly a mess! Our angel was speechless – “What was *he* doing here? He had no right to be here; heaven was reserved for...”

This was their way of telling the story of the cross as Luke tells us. Wherever you go in the world, the cross is the symbol of Christian faith and the Christian church. Crosses come in all sorts, from bare wooden crosses in the garden outside a church, to crosses carved in stone above church doorways, to garish neon crosses in cities. Everywhere you see a cross it is saying “Christians meet here!” The cross was a horrible place, a place of execution for the Romans, a place of great pain and suffering, yet it has become the universal symbol of the Christian faith because it was the place where Jesus completed His God-given mission. This is Jesus the King, being the King God has set Him to be; this is Jesus completing the picture painted by Jeremiah (*chapter 23:5,6*) of the wise king who would do what is just and right and set the world to rights.

Three things that stand out for me today about this king:

1. *He forgives*: most people in Jesus’ situation would be ranting and raving, shouting about those people who dared to put Him on cross; most of us would be full of anger and hatred. What does Jesus say: “*Father, forgive...*” (*Luke 23:34*) Is this directed at the Roman soldiers who have crucified Him? Or is it directed at the Jews whose scheming had led to Him being arrested in the first place? In a sense it doesn’t matter, because Jesus speaks words of forgiveness for the people who have made this happen to Him. He is ready to forgive, to treat people as if they had done nothing wrong. We see this quality in Jesus time and time again and here at the climax of His ministry. He forgives!
2. *He refuses to think about himself*: there is a crowd, maybe only a small crowd, but there are people standing around watching. Some of them are His friends; others are His enemies, perhaps there just to make sure there is no last-minute reprieve. His enemies are there to make fun, to make mischief, to cause as much trouble and turmoil for Jesus as they can. So, they make fun of Him: “*He saved...*” (*Luke 23:35*) Their jibe, their criticism, sums Jesus up. Yes, He saved others, but He had no thought for Himself and for His own safety. He saved others, but at the great personal cost of His life. He refuses to think about Himself, but only about the people He loves and for whom He gives His life. His mission is to save others; He refuses to think about Himself.
3. *He is full of compassion for a broken thief*: Did the thief hear these words about forgiveness? His pal joined in the criticism of Jesus! He got an earful in return: “*don’t you...*” (*Luke 23:40f*) How did the thief know about Jesus “the innocent man”? But then he turns to Jesus and says “*Jesus, remember...*” (*Luke 23:42*) He senses that he wants to belong; he deserves to be where he is, but he wants to belong, to be reconciled with God, to be forgiven. Jesus’ answer lives in the annals of gospel and history: “*I tell...*” (*Luke 23:43*) “Paradise”, the place of rest and perfect peace, the place where God is to be found in a new way. Does the thief deserve this? That misses the point! Jesus sees his faith, his repentance, his open heart, and is full of compassion and grace; Jesus opens the door and the thief walks through; his story is told forever.

Two things come from this:

First, forgiveness is the key to understanding what Jesus came to do. Forgiveness is the key to the gospel. Forgiveness is God treating us as if we had done nothing wrong! The Creed invites us to say "I believe in the forgiveness of sins", the big principle; Jesus says to the people He meets "Your sins are forgiven!" which is a whole different ball-game, the personal experience of forgiveness, the sense of God treating *us* as if we are blameless of any fault or mistake. Jesus died that we might be forgiven. The symbolism of water in baptism for children is about God forgiving us even before we've done anything wrong. So how is it that we find it so hard to accept God's gift of forgiveness? Why do we find it so hard to say, "I believe that my sins are forgiven"? Have we been told so often about our faults and failures that we think nothing will ever take them away? Jesus forgives us! Jesus is able. He died that we might be forgiven.

Second, Jesus is the example to us of what kind of people to be. Forgiveness, thinking of others, compassion – these are the qualities we see in our King. These are the qualities He would see in us. Being forgiven, we should be inspired to forgive others, to treat other people as if they have done nothing wrong to us; boy, is that hard to do when all we really want to do is plot our revenge and take it when nobody is looking! We live in a world which, in many ways, is "me-centred", when lots of people think only of themselves; the challenge of King Jesus is for us to think of others, to consider others' needs alongside our own. Compassion is all about caring for the needs of others, feeling with others in their times of need, being open-hearted towards others. These are the values that Jesus teaches, values by which Jesus has lived and we see them embodied in Him. This is the kind of people Jesus wants us to be; people who are learning to be like Him.

This is our King; King Jesus didn't fit the hopes and dreams of some; He came to be a different kind of king. He is our Lord, the king of His Church. When He is King of our lives, the world is changed; we are different and the world is changed. What kind of King? He is a King who forgives, who refuses to think about Himself, who is full of compassion. He is a King for us to love, a King for us to copy, a King for us to serve!