



The Reign of Christ, Year C – November 21, 2010
Luke 23.33-43

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

As a reading for the Feast of Christ the King, this one is, frankly, startling. We are no strangers to the idea of Jesus reigning from the tree, but generally not until we've cleaned him up a bit, got him past the Resurrection, and organised a change of clothes — Christian art is replete with magnificent images of a white-robed Jesus resplendent on the cross. It is as if we can only think of the kingship of Christ Crucified *backwards*, telescoped as were, through the lens of Easter.

But that is not what we are being asked to do here. We are being asked instead to look at a naked, battered, thirsty, and helpless Jesus, and to believe that *this* is the King of Jews. Not the King of the Jews in a temporary state of siege, but the King of the Jews in full possession of his regal authority — busy being King, as it were.

What kind of a king is this? And over what kind of a kingdom does he hold sway? We need to know, because the Kingdom of God is what the Church is all about.

There is so much that one could say, but let us confine ourselves to those few clues provided by Luke's account of the crucifixion.

I begin with the obvious: Jesus is here, hanging on this cross, because a whole lot of people — people with the power to do this kind of thing to other people — are mad at him. In other words, we can expect that the values of the kingdom of God are going to be in conflict with those of the existing power structures. Further, if the experience of Jesus is any example (and for a Christians there isn't much room to manoeuvre on this point), such conflict will be deeply rooted in the debate about how we order our common life. It is a poor substitute for Christianity which reduces the Kingdom of God to spirituality and private piety. Think about it: Nobody could have cared less about Jesus' prayer life (or at least, to the extent they did, it was to envy it, not to criticise). What really got the authorities hopping mad was the way in which Jesus waded into such political debates as taxation practices. (Don't forget, the gospel of Luke begins with a census for the purposes of taxation; and it ends with a trial in which Jesus is accused of forbidding people to pay their taxes: make no mistake, this was a big issue!) What really got people angry was the way in which Jesus challenged the social order by offering table fellowship to outcasts and sinners. But what sent them over the top was his attack on the Temple. The Temple treasury was one of the engines of the local economy, and it was the singular emblem of the corrupt complicity between Rome and the religious establishment. My point is simply this: the Kingdom of God is about nothing less than the transformation of this world. We do both it, and the example of Jesus, an injustice when we interiorise our Christianity, or reduce our religion to helping people (notably ourselves) "feel good".

Second, the triumph of this dying King is, in part, that he didn't sell out. It would have been a cinch: the options were as wide-ranging as skipping town before the Last Supper, to cutting a deal with the Procurator. But he didn't do it, and part of what makes this broken specimen so convincing, so regal, is his absolute integrity. This, too, is a mark of the Kingdom of God. Kingdom people stand for their convictions, even when it would be easier and a whole lot safer not to.

The third thing which is notable about King Jesus is the very incongruity which caught our attention in the first place: this is a king who eschews the props of power. He is without beauty. He is without finery. He is without honour. His only title is the one penned in oxblood over his head, and *it* was meant as a little joke: This is the King of the Jews. He has emptied himself. We have a word for this, "kenosis". It, too, is a principle of kingdom life — that true strength is born of weakness, that true power is realised in servanthood.

And as if to emphasise the point, we may observe, fourth, how Jesus uses the power that he has. His executioners, of course, expect that if he is really the King of the Jews, he will save himself. We may safely assume that the fact he does not do so constitutes ample proof in their eyes that he is exactly what they thought he was, an impostor. But they are wrong. Because the dying King does indeed exercise his power, but not to save himself. He uses it instead to save the penitent thief: "This day, you will be with me in Paradise." In the kingdom, power is not a commodity to be hoarded, or to be pressed into the service of self. It is for the sake of others. Imagine!

We come last to the unsolicited word of forgiveness, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing." Forgiveness is foreign territory in the kingdom of *this* world. Read a newspaper; think about the conflicts in Afghanistan, or Sudan, or right here in Canada, and ask yourself if "forgiveness" even exists in the lexicon of diplomacy. We sometimes forget that while forgiveness may not be a uniquely Christian *option* in the resolution of our difficulties with each other, it is a uniquely Christian *imperative*. It's not easy (very little about the kingdom is), and we often fail at it. Even so, Jesus managed it in the most difficult circumstances possible: while yet being abused, and in the absence of any apology. In the Kingdom there are no grudges, and there is no shame, because when the Kingdom comes, we shall have learned, like Christ, how to forgive one another.

This is what kind of king hangs on that tree. This is the kind of Kingdom over which he holds sway. And this matters, because the Kingdom of God is what the Church is all about. Which Church we are.