

# As Plain As The Nose On Your Face

Christ The King Sunday

November 25, 2007

Luke 23:33-43

Back in college we did what we called a Clown Worship. The seven or eight of us (there may have only been four) would don our painted faces and clown outfits, and we actually had music to be played for each part of the “worship”. We also had a tripod to hold the signs stating where we were in the service, and a cute way to get the sign to the tripod. What I remember about the “sermon sign” was how we would make it seem so heavy (show how one worked to get it up to the tripod).

THAT is how I feel about today. If you read the bulletin this morning you know it is Christ The King Sunday. To me it has a “heavy” sound to it. Christ The King Sunday! In my mind I can see all of you coming into church this way (walk across stage lightly, happily), and leaving church this way (walk across stage with shoulders bent over and knees bent). I worried about how to make this joyful. Fortunately, the message itself is joyful, so we should be fine.

Thank you for being here today. Many of our number are away for the Holidays. Let’s remember them as they travel. Would you join me in a word of prayer?

As the oldest child in a dysfunctional family, I have spent my life being extremely hard on myself for making mistakes. Any of you can say hurtful things to me, and some of you can be vicious, but none of you can be as hard on me as I am on me! My reinforcement came from my dad who always let me know when I did something wrong, but often forgot to praise the good. I learned to be proud of myself for something good

So one of the things I learned early was to hate the phrases that sound like “if it was a snake it would have bitten you”, “even a blind person can see that”, “it’s as plain as the nose on your face”. You and I both know about those things that are so obvious we really don’t see them. That is why many accidents happen only a mile from home. The scenery is so familiar we stop paying attention!

The short story from back in the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade – The Purloined Letter – is about an important letter someone was after. Thieves were sent into the home to take the letter. The thieves looked everywhere, in drawers, behind pictures, under rugs, in the attic. The letter just could not be found. The story ends with the letter discovered by those who should find it, and it was just where it was left, on the top

of the stack of paper in a letter tray. It was in the most obvious place, but was not seen.

That, my friends, is the gist of our story today. What was most obvious was not seen by everyone. The story is of three men dying on crosses. It is a familiar story. I am certain you recognized it when it was read a moment ago. One of the men is angry, one is repentant, and the other is “the firstborn of all creation”.

Doesn't it seem an odd story to hear on this particular day? The Sunday after Thanksgiving we hear about the place of the skull, and the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now for those of you “in the know”, this is nothing, but for those of you, like myself, who did not necessarily grow up in the church, learning about this has been interesting. So just in case you don't know, here it is in short.

Last year on the first day of Advent we began a new church year (you remember, we lit the candle, read the scripture, said a prayer, the same thing we will do next week when this all begins again). From the beginning of the church's year, we have been hearing about the coming of Christ, the anointed one of God who would save his people. We know the story of the baby born in a manger, and the part of the shepherds, astrologers, and others concerned with a new king who would come. Even as we read in the Gospels when Jesus is calling his disciples, Nathanael refers to him as the “King of Israel”. From there we know of his ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people greeting him (Palm Sunday).

We made it through Easter with the good news of the resurrection, we have celebrated the victory of Christ over death and the powers of evil. That was followed by the season of Pentecost, and now we find ourselves at the conclusion of the year. From what we have heard and seen we can now make the proclamation about Jesus Christ who is “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Nonetheless this is a day woven with paradox. Today's gospel lesson comes as a surprise, if not as an outright shock. God's anointed king is dying like a common criminal. To a casual observer on that early Friday afternoon, things were not going all that well for the “king.” Though there had been moments of huge crowd support, times when a voice spoke from heaven, and hopes that the kingdom of God was dawning with power at any moment, today's lesson hardly gives that impression.

Isn't it funny how we get something in our head and then cannot believe it doesn't happen just as we imagined it? Perception is reality they say. Haven't we

all had experiences where something was said and what we heard is NOT what we experienced at all?

The point is that Jesus had been in their midst the entire time, and he told them who he was. Many had witnessed the miracles he performed, but they somehow could not grasp the truth of his words. Not that they didn't know the words. You can read in our verses today beginning with verse 35 the words of the leaders, "let him save himself if he is the Messiah (Christ/Anointed One) of God." They knew what he had said, but he didn't fit the description they imagined for their messiah. (Don't you just hate it when someone uses your words against you?)

And isn't it funny how people who have no idea about something can become experts in an instant! In verse 36 we can see that the Roman soldiers joined in the jeering "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." I suppose they might as well have some fun while they carry out their grisly task

Then we come to the two companions of Jesus who hung on crosses next to him. There is a saying, "Hurt people hurt people", and it might be true, for one of the men joined in the mockery. Obviously the man has nothing left to lose. His crucifixion might be for some violent or treasonous offence, but here he is at the end of his life and what does he do? He takes one more opportunity to feel superior to someone else. He may be dying, but at least he is not so deluded as this wretched Galilean rabbi with pretensions to grandeur. Sarcastically he sneers, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." It's great to get that off your chest, to go out sneering at the world the same way you lived, scoffing at authority. The absurdity of the situation is perfectly clear.

It is pretty obvious from the gospel story that none of these people recognized Jesus for who he was: And this - it seemed - meant to them that they could abuse him as they might abuse any convicted criminal

To them - nothing special was going on - it was business as usual, business without thinking, business without considering what it was that God would want out of them whether or not this man on the cross was the Messiah - or simply a misguided fool.

The second criminal recognizes the presence of God's salvation. He sees what others cannot see, and he understands, however dimly, what others will come to understand only by being taught later. Hear his words, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He recognized something beyond appearances because of the cross. In a very real sense he was the first to follow the way of the cross!

This is such a beautiful picture, but also reason for great hope. Do you realize what this teaches? Truth can be discovered by those we consider to be beyond redemption, and therefore by us as well. This dying criminal asks so little and receives so much. It is the same for us.

Now in fairness to those mentioned in the Gospel story, the negative ones who mocked Jesus, I want to back up for a moment. Anyone ever see the show called "Reasonable Doubts"?

The story was about a female defense lawyer who represented a man convicted of two brutal killings before a parole board. He was seeking release from prison after serving 14 years and she succeeded in getting him released.

A policeman who was present at the original crime scene gives the lawyer a rough time after the hearing, telling her that she should not be representing such people, that the man she was defending was nothing but scum.

Later that day the police officer discovers that the lawyer's mother had died from cancer the night before and so, the next time he sees the lawyer he says, "I'm sorry, if I had known your mother had died I would have gone easier on you."

Another character in the story - the deaf prosecutor who was the main star, also gives the lady lawyer a hard time for representing the killer before the parole board - and she too, later hears about the mother's death.

The next time the prosecutor sees the defense lawyer she also says to her - "Sorry, if I had known I would have gone easier on you."

So I got thinking how often WE say and do such things. Seriously, it happens all the time - in the normal bustle of daily living - when we are moving too fast, or feeling in need of help.

- we fail to recognize what is happening around us,
- we forget what it is that we should be about.

If only I had known....

I mention this today, because we are asked to remember that Jesus, when all is said and done, is our King, and I can't help thinking that when it comes to our obedience to our king, when it comes to our willingness to show him our respect and honour, many of us end up making the same mistake with him that we make with other people:

- we blunder ahead on a business as usual basis, being casual, abrupt, and insensitive - until, all of sudden it seems, we realize that something special is going on.

What is this – “If I had known” excuse anyway? We are not comfortable with those in the scripture using it to excuse themselves.

I think it is a genuine kind of excuse, people are very sincere when they offer it, but does it really count for a lot in the long run?

Shouldn't we be caring and loving and respectful all the time? Shouldn't we always pay attention - before we say or do something, to where the person is at - to who the person is - to what the situation is?

Shouldn't we honour our Lord and our King all the time, and not just at special times like Sunday morning?

See, I believe that if those who acted this way at the foot of the cross could come back and stand before Christ today - as we can stand before him – they would say to him:

Sorry Jesus, if I had known I would have gone easier on you. If I had known I would have taken your part like the other thief took your part, I would have wept for you instead of jeering at you."

What does it mean to claim that Jesus is our Messiah, our King, our Lord. If it does not mean that we are to act differently? to show him our respect? and to strive to honour him and obey him and serve him at all times? And never more so than when he is actually here with us?

But what happens when we fail to recognize that our God and our King is actually here among us? Recall what the prophet Isaiah said about Christ? About our God and King?

He had no form of majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him - and so it was he was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with grief.

The story is told about a Guru who was mediating in his Mountain cave. When he opened his eyes he discovered an unexpected visitor sitting before him - the abbot of a well known monastery.

"What is it you seek", asked the Guru?

The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous throughout the western world. It's cells were filled with young aspirants

and its church had resounded to the chant of its monks. But hard times had come on the monastery. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the aspirants had dried up, and the church was almost silent. There were only a handful of monks left and these went about their duties with heavy hearts.

Now this is what the abbot wanted to know - "Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?"

"Yes", replied the Guru, "a sin of ignorance."

"And what might that sin be?"

"One of your number is the Messiah in disguise and your are ignorant of this", replied the Guru - and having said so he closed his eyes and returned to his meditation.

Throughout the long journey back to his monastery the abbot's heart beat fast as he thought that the Messiah - the Messiah himself - had returned to earth and was right there in his monastery. How was it that he had failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Worship? Brother Treasurer? Brother Preacher? No, not him; he had too many defects. But then, the Guru had said he was in disguise. Could those defects be part of his disguise? Come to think of it, everyone in the monastery had defects. And one of them had to be Messiah.

Back in the monastery the abbot assembled all the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible. But he was supposed to be here in disguise. So, maybe. What if it were so and so? Or the other one over there? Or...

One thing was certain. If the Messiah was there in disguise, it was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with special respect and consideration. "You never know", they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, "maybe this is the one."

The result was that the atmosphere of the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the order. - and once again the church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks who were aglow with the spirit of love.

Jesus, our Messiah, our king, is here today somewhere in this church, somewhere in this community.

He has no form of majesty about him that we should look at look at him, nothing about his appearance that we desire him --- but he is here.

And we owe him - for he is our King - and our saviour  
we owe him our praise, our obedience, our special honour and care,  
not just in our times of prayer - when we address him upon his throne, but in each minute of each day as we meet him as we go about our normal business.

None of us can really say to him - if only I had known, for we do know -- and we are ALL called to show our respect and our devotion each and every day.

The heart of the Gospel is the paradox of the cross – Jesus fulfilled in his total self his basic teaching: “he who would lose his life will save it.”  
Representatives of all humankind – the common people, the leaders, the soldiers, and even a criminal who shares his crucifixion – failed to comprehend the mystery, and threw his own words back at him. Well, all that is except the penitent thief.

He recognized something and became part of a long list of outcasts and sinners in the Gospel accounts who found life in Jesus – prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, as well as characters in parables: the prodigal son, unjust steward, and Lazarus the beggar. The sovereign Lord of all creation has compassion for every sinner. The reign of Christ, the King of Love, is for all who choose to be his subjects.

Today I offer a simple invitation to you. If you have never accepted Christ as Savior, I encourage you to do so today. If you have but have never professed it, come down and do it today. If you are looking for a church home, this is one that will fit.

I don't know your situation today, but I do know this. We don't need to be ignorant of the fact that the Messiah is in our midst in disguise, and we need to serve him. I encourage all of you to make him King of Kings and Lord of Lords, for he is Lord of all.

Come now as we sing our song of invitation hymn.