

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/20/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Christ the King / Reign of Christ

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, November 20th

Luke 23:33-43

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The image of the invisible God

This is the last Sunday of the Christian year, a week before the season of Advent begins. The festival of Christ the King (or Reign of Christ) ends our marking of Ordinary Time after the Day of Pentecost, and moves us to the threshold of Advent, the season of hope for Christ's coming again at the end of time. It is most fitting that our celebration of Christ the King begins with Christ at the moment of His greatest humility. For the uninitiated, this week's Gospel narrative is one of despair and defeat. To the initiated, hope radiates off the page.

Luke 23:33-43 Commentary

The account of the suffering and death of Jesus began with the plot to kill Jesus (22:1) followed by the Passover meal (22:1-38) and continues with the arrest, trial and death of Jesus on the cross (22:39-23:56).

³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

Luke does not provide any of the horrific details of the crucifixion. Being crucified between two criminals adds to the humiliation. Yet despite what has just happened, Jesus prays for forgiveness for all those involved. This is same response from Stephen, the first martyr for Christ in Acts 7:60. As Jesus is on the cross in agony and humiliation, the soldiers below divide up his clothes. Just another day at the office for them. This is an allusion to Psalm 22:18. "*they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*" Earlier in Luke's Gospel, a woman suffering from a discharge of blood for twelve years touched the fringe this very same outer garment and was cured (8:43-48).

While the crowd watches, Jesus is taunted with respect to His mission of salvation (1:69; 2:11, 30; 19:10), part of the very work He is performing at that moment:

(1) The rulers scoffed: "*He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!*"

(2) The soldiers mocked: *"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"*

(3) The criminal railed (*eblasphemei*): *"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"*

This is another allusion to Psalm 22 (vv.7,8). The irony is, of course, if Jesus had saved Himself, He would not have saved us. These three taunts can be compared to the three earlier temptations of Jesus by Satan (4:1-13):

(1) *"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."* (4:3)

(2) *"If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."* (4:7)

(3) *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here"* (4:9)

We read, *"When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time"* (4:13). Now?

The promise of Genesis 3:15 is about to be fulfilled: [God speaking to the serpent] *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* While Christ's human nature is about to temporarily suffer death and then be raised from the grave, the serpent is about to be dealt a mortal blow that will be final at the end of the age.

⁴⁰ *But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"* ⁴¹ *And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴² *And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

⁴³ *And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

In response to the mocking of Jesus by the first criminal, the other is repentant and rebukes the first. His request of Jesus indicates how the changed criminal understands that death will not be the final word for Jesus. Jesus will become King. He will enter into His Kingdom. This criminal does not expect to be saved from crucifixion. His appeal is for Jesus to remember him.

Reflections

The English rendering *"Truly I say to you, ..."* is found 72 times in the ESV New Testament. It is only found in the four Gospels and only Christ speaks this phrase. It is found six other times in Luke (4:24; 12:37; 12:44; 18:17; 18:29; 21:32). Every occurrence in the New Testament has a comma after the word you: *"Truly, I say to you,"* This phrase is thus an announcement of what comes AFTER the comma is going to be important and it certainly is here: *"today you will be with me in paradise"* (23:43).

If the repentant criminal was expecting some distant bodily resurrection, Jesus assures him (and us) of a more immediate communion with Him until His return and the final resurrection at the end of the age. This is the hope with which we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. The inscription over Jesus on the cross, *"This is the King of the Jews"* (28:38) is merely the tip of the iceberg.

The picture here of Christ the King is not the picture of a traditional worldly king. There is no pomp and circumstance. Since monarchs have gone out of style, there is no motorcade, protection detail, or band playing hale to the chief. The picture of Jesus here is a crown of thorns rather than one of gold, crucified on a cross rather than sitting on a throne. This is the true nature of Kingdom leadership – there is power in humility, there is love in defeat, and there is grace in shame. There is another kingdom quietly working and one day it will break out in all its glory and conquer all others. This Kingdom will never end. Which kingdom are you pursuing? Which king are you serving?