

NO ORDINARY KING
Sermon for Pentecost Last C, Proper 29- Lk 23:33-43
LPC, 11/2016

Well, we are finally past the presidential election, following what was perhaps the angriest, most vitriolic and divisive campaign since the American Civil War. Perhaps one of the things that made this campaign so angry, so vitriolic and so divisive is that people on both sides looked at the *other* candidate and thought, “There is NO WAY that person can possibly be *my* president. There is NO WAY that person can possibly stand for me. That is not me at all.”

Just for grins, let’s apply the same criterion to Jesus. Let’s ask ourselves how well Jesus stands for who we really are. This person who goes out of his way to antagonize the religious establishment? This person who hangs around with criminals and low-lives? This person who refuses to return insult for insult? Does that type of behavior represent who and what we are? Does that type of behavior even represent the way we *want* to be?

I would have to say no. That’s not the person I am. In all honesty that’s not even the person I aspire to be. And that’s not the type of person I can see myself supporting for president. Think about that. Would someone who challenged established religion, freely associated with the underworld, and refused to retaliate when our country was insulted get your vote?

Now, Jesus is our King, not our president. This is Christ the King Sunday. Arguably it makes a big difference whether you are talking about a king or a president. But it’s obvious that Jesus makes as peculiar a king as he would a president.

Today’s theme is Christ the King. And what type of Bible reading do we have to support this theme? Do we have Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem? No. Do we have Christ’s Transfiguration on the mountaintop where he is irradiated with light and converses with heavenly figures? No. Do we have Jesus ascending into glory to sit at the Father’s right hand? No. Do we even have Christ triumphantly rising from the dead? No. We have Christ on the cross. Somehow, this picture of abject humiliation is what the wise church people who made up the lectionary believed most fully represents Christ’s kingship.

We know the story. We know that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and died a horrible death normally reserved for the worst criminals. What is most striking about this particular passage from the Gospel of Luke is how much mocking goes on. The leaders of the people mock Jesus. The soldiers mock Jesus. Even one of the criminals mocks Jesus. They specifically mock Jesus for his claims to kingship. Naked, bleeding, agonizingly struggling for each breath... Where’s your kingdom now, boy? Where’s your high-and-mighty talk? Show us that heavenly power you’re supposed to have!

Jesus is not defiant. He does not return insult for insult. He does not proudly stick out his chin and refuse to let his enemies see him cry. Nor does he sink into silent despair. There are two quotes from Jesus in this passage, and they are both mild, and *relational*. Jesus’ enemies have separated themselves from him, and seek to widen that distance with insult and mocking.

But Jesus continues to relate to them. “Father, forgive them.” “Today you will be with me.” Though he has been rejected, he does not reject at all. He remains connected. Wow.

This is no ordinary king.

And if this is *our* king, as Christians, can we not, when people provoke us, remember what he did when people tried to provoke him?

Let me bring this home. At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned the election and the acrimonious campaign that preceded it. If you haven’t noticed, the anger of the campaign did not go away with the election. The people whose candidate lost are angry. They are calling the winning candidate’s supporters, “Idiots.” This angers the people whose candidate won. They are calling the other side, “Spoiled children.” Anger begets anger begets anger. Where, oh where, does it end?

Could it be time to really claim Jesus as our king and refuse, as he did, to return anger for anger, insult for insult? This isn’t ISUS. These are our fellow Americans. In many cases these are our fellow Christians. I’m not suggesting that we compromise our ideals. I’m suggesting that even in disagreement we remain in relationship with each other instead of writing each other off. We are a family, we humans. That’s what God intended, anyway.

As a practical consideration, I offer a secular tool, one that I think I have mentioned before, that can be useful in the practice of refusing to return insult for insult. This is the THINK rule. THINK before you speak. Today one must also add THINK before you post or tweet. Ask yourself:

- T Is it true? Can I verify what I am about to share from a variety of sources, besides the ones whose editorial opinions I tend to agree with?
- H Is it helpful? What is the likely result if I share this?
- I Is it intelligent? Something can be true but still be juvenile.
- N Is it necessary? Am I just repeating something that’s already been said?
- K Is it kind? Can I imagine saying this to (or about) someone I love? Can I imagine saying this to (or about) Jesus?

I had my doubts about whether to preach this sermon, especially after I more or less summarized it to a colleague last week and failed to assuage that person’s anger. I hope that is not the case here, but if it is, I apologize. I am sometimes wrong. The fact is that refusing to answer insult for insult as Jesus did will not always defuse the anger. It didn’t in Jesus’ case. But it can provide an answer to the question I asked earlier: where does it end?

No one individual can change this wicked, wicked world, but individuals can say, “As for me, I will serve my Lord and King. I may not be able to put an end to the anger in this world, but I can choose not to add to it.” In answer to the question, “Where does it end?” We can, as Jesus did, and with Jesus’ help, say, “Here. It ends here.”