

Christ the King Sunday (November 20, 2022) Text: Luke 23:33-43

“Save Us From Our Crosses ”

He sat in my office, as he had many times before, but this time I could tell something was not quite right. It might have been the phone call a few days earlier in which he said, *“I really need to talk with you.”* (That could be a hint I should pick up on.) But it was also his demeanor, the slumped look to his shoulders, the downturn of his mouth, the way he kind of slunk into the chair.

After a few moments of conversation about things that had gone on since the last time we saw each other (about three months earlier) I asked what was going on that he *needed* to talk about. *“I just feel like I’m under attack! All the stuff I thought I had been dealing with pretty well just keeps flooding back in.”* We talked some about those difficulties — some of them dealing with bad habits, some dealing with yielded-to temptations, some relationship struggles — and then he said: *“It’s really hard to believe in God at times like this, isn’t it? It seems like a hoax about God, about heaven, about God’s presence being with us, about God intervening in the life situations of ourselves. It all seems like such a hoax.”*

I knew right then it was time to go to prayer. I asked if he would like to lead the two of us in prayer; he thought for a moment, then declined. After I prayed with him, we both knew it was time. We said goodbye. We hugged. And we were both aware; I was aware and he was aware that God had been with us, that God had been with us in this conversation, and both of us had experienced in some small measure the healing presence of God.

It is with the awareness of the feelings of that conversation, that we approach the Holy Gospel for Christ the King Sunday.

Jesus was on the cross and three times Jesus was taunted with variations of that important issue. The crowd said, ***“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”*** The soldiers

chimed in, ***“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”*** And finally came the last one, the big one, ***“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”*** It is the ***“and us”*** that rings from the cross down through the centuries into our hearts.

Then we blend to this the words from Colossians (here paraphrased),

“You, Christ, are the visible likeness of the invisible God.

You, Christ, created the heavens and the earth.

You, Christ, are the head of the church.

You, Christ, are the first born of the dead.

Jesus, if You are all these things,

if You are the visible presence of the invisible God,

if You are the creator of the all the galaxies,

if You are the first born of the dead,

certainly You should be able to save Yourself from the cross.

Certainly, You should be able to save us from the crosses we bear.”

Isn't that our question as well? Jesus Christ, if You are the Son of God, why didn't You save Yourself from the cross? Jesus Christ, why don't You save us from our crosses?

Jesus, if You are the Son of God, why didn't You save that friend of mine who was thirty-five-years-old, who had two children, and was dying of cancer, and now just died and left those two children and a dear wife.

Jesus, if You are the Son of God, why didn't You save him from his cross? And why didn't You save my father? Why didn't You save my mother from the immense indignity of the pain from her kind of cancer?

God, if You are really God, why don't You intervene.

And how about that woman whose husband died at the age of forty three, and she has had a horrible life for the past twenty years. Now, she has cancer and is getting ready to die. Jesus, if You are the Son of God, why don't You take those crosses off those peoples' backs? Off from our backs? And if You can't save these people from the cross, perhaps You aren't the Son of God after all.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Today is the day that we celebrate Christ as the King. Today is the day we celebrate Christ as the creator of the galaxies, the first born of the dead, the head of the church.

What kind of king is this anyhow? What kind of king is this who does not use his power, who does not use his divine connections, to get himself off the cross? What kind of king is this who does not use his connections, influences, and resources to get you and me off our crosses? What kind of a king is this who allows so much immense suffering on this planet earth?

I would like to say that today we are at the very mystery of God, the mystery of the universe, at the very heart of the mystery of love. God chose to experience the place of the greatest pain, the cross. In the cross, we are met with the very mystery of God, where God chose not to avoid the suffering of this world. And we hear the statement echoing in us, *“where suffering is, love is. And where love is, God is.”* We are here at the very heart of the incomprehensible mystery of God which is symbolized by the cross.

Now, it goes without saying, but needs to be said, anyhow: you and I are not quite the same as God. We try to avoid suffering, often at all costs. When we get the cross put on our back, we often complain, *“Why me, God? Why us?”* We get angry at God; we become depressed; we become hurt; we no longer believe in God or that God intervenes in our lives.

Isn't it an interesting quality of human beings that the whole world can be suffering, and we never ask the question, why; but when something goes wrong with me, with my family, with my friends, with my loved ones; when something goes wrong with my life, I then ask the question deeply and personally, *“Why God? Why me? Why us? Why my loved one?”* What is it that makes that true about human nature?

It needs to be said clearly that the nature of God is not to avoid suffering; that the nature of love is not to avoid pain or the places of pain. That's the way love is; that's the way God is; not to avoid pain and not to avoid

the places of pain. Intuitively, we all know that. Intuitively, we all sense that. Loving people do not use their resources and connections to avoid the pain of their loved ones. I'll say that again: loving people do not use their resources and connections to avoid the pain of their loved ones. You know that and so do I.

Think of all the people in our congregation who have had to visit one or another hospital this past year. Some of you who are here today; recently, you've had to travel to a hospital and have had to do so much too often. When you go to that hospital, you know that the medical problem being faced is not simple; your loved one has a complicated disease or medical problem, or you wouldn't be going to see him or her at the hospital.

Why is it that when every single patient goes to the hospital, why is it that every spouse, child, parent is down there immediately as well? You are down in that hospital right with your husband or wife, your father or mother, your child, and if you had your way, you would stay all night with that loved one. You will not allow for yourself to be physically separated from your loved one if at all humanly possible.

Why is it that way? How is it that love is much stronger than the places of pain? That's the nature of love. That's the way love is.

Love is always stronger than pain. Love is stronger than the fear of pain, and that is why you go, even if it means pain for you as well as the patient. You couldn't stop from going to see them, even if you had a bulldozer or huge truck strapped to your waist. You are determined to see them, to be with them (it was the one thing most tragic in the Covid pandemic; loved ones were kept away).

A chaplain asked a child why her parents wanted to be with her in the hospital and she had a really good answer: "*Because they don't want me to be alone.*" And so it is with God: God does not want us to be alone at our most frightening or painful moments.

I could point to various members seated here this morning for whom,

over the past year, this has been true. I have no idea what your employers thought of your faithfulness throughout your work life; but I know when it came to assuring that your loved one was not alone, you were on time and in place. That's the way God is. That is the nature of love; that is the nature of God, to go and be with people in the midst of their pain and suffering.

Now, all of the people that I described could have used their connections and resources to avoid going to the hospital, to avoid going to the places of suffering, but they didn't because genuine love, true love, God's love is always stronger than pain and the fear of pain and the places of pain.

We look to people like Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer, Ghandi, and we are impressed at the sacrifices they made for the welfare of others. We say that we admire that sacrifice. I think we are, instead, amazed by that sacrifice. We can hardly believe they did what they did, because we are pretty much convinced in our hearts that could never do that.

Yet I see people doing smaller versions of this all the time. Those hospital visitors . . . those of you who have supported Redeemer Crisis Center . . . those who walked for Akron Pregnancy Services . . . who donated for the community pantry . . . in other words, those whose love would not let them step away just because it might have been a bit threatening, or somewhat inconvenient, or demanding, or even demeaning — you know how love will not step away from pain.

The same is true with God. Why did God not stay up in heaven where it was safe? If I were God, I would have stayed up in heaven where it was safe, built a nice fire in the heavenly fireplace and read a book about angels to the angels gathered around me, whose wings were cuddled around my heavenly throne. But not God. When God looked down on this earth, God saw all the pain that was down here and God came down here to this earth to be with us. And to be in our places of greatest pain. We understand that because we understand mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, children and friends and how deep is their need to be with those they love in the midst of pain.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Our Lord, the King, says to you and me. *“I love you. I am with you. I will strengthen you. No matter what your situation, I will be with you in the midst of your pain. And when you die, it will be as I said to the thief on the cross, ‘today, this very day, you shall be with me in paradise.’”* Today is Christ the King Sunday. A king who will not use His resources to stay away from pain, but who comes to us in the midst of pain. And who stayed on that cross to the bitter end.

Why? Because that’s what love does.

Amen.