

When I was growing up, two of my favorite stories to read were by Mark Twain: *The Prince and the Pauper*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Both of these stories have something in common. It's only a part of *A Connecticut Yankee*, but it's a central theme in *The Prince and the Pauper*. Both of these stories have royalty, either the King or the Prince, dressing up as commoners, and going out among their people to see what their lives were like. The only way these rulers could see what their countries were really like was to get out of their palaces and move about the countryside with their subjects. It was Mark Twain's 19th century version of *Undercover Boss*.

This Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year, is the feast day of Christ the King. Today we celebrate Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And like the fictional kings who dressed up and went about as commoners, Jesus Christ became fully human, and lived with us as one of us.

In this morning's Epistle from Colossians, St. Paul speaks of Jesus' kingship. But Jesus is not a typical, earthly king. Paul says, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." In other words, Jesus was with God before the beginning of time, before the creation of the universe. Jesus' kingship extends to his very nature, his very being as the firstborn, the image of God.

But God the son was not content to remain aloof and distant. The Christ did not remain far away, removed from human experience. Instead he became fully human. Unlike the stories of the Greek gods who disguised themselves as humans, Jesus became human. Really human. Jesus became one of us.

And through him, God accomplished our redemption. As St. Paul says this morning, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."¹

This is a glorious reading. This is glorious, good news, that God the Son has lived with us as one of us, and that he reconciled, he brought all things to himself, through the blood of his cross. As St. Paul says, "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son."² What a glorious picture this is of the nature and the work of Christ the King. What a wonderful statement this is of the glory and power and love of God.

And yet, our Gospel reading stands in sharp contrast to the glory of our Epistle reading. In our Gospel, we don't find a picture of a king in glory who is all powerful and created all things. Instead we find a picture of a man. A bleeding man. A man with dried up spit on his face. A dying man. A man nailed to a cross. In contrast to the glory of Colossians, we find Luke's picture of Jesus Christ crucified.

And as Jesus is hanging on the cross, he is taunted with same thing three different times. The Jewish leaders scoff at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is

¹ Col 1:19-20

² Col 1:13

the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"³ The Roman soldiers say, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"⁴ And one of the criminals crucified with him says, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"⁵ Three times. Three different groups. One taunt, "Save yourself."

It is so ironic. Jesus could save himself. Jesus had that power. But if Jesus does save himself and comes down from the cross, then he wouldn't be saving others. To save others, to save us, to save all the world, he could not save himself. If he did save himself, then his work of salvation would be for naught.

Even in pain, even in a state of weakness, even in the face of taunting and spitting, Jesus remains true to his vocation and calling. Jesus is the savior, and to save others, he must NOT save himself. Even on the cross, Jesus' focus is others, and not himself. Jesus never forgets what his mission is.

And then, we hear that wonderful account that's only found in Luke's Gospel.

One of the criminals has been taunting Jesus. But the other says, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."⁶

These guys were probably zealots. These days we would call them terrorists or freedom fighters, depending on your point of view. The zealots fought the Romans. They also robbed others so that the economy would be destabilized and collapse and so the Romans would be forced to leave.

And on the cross next to Jesus, the so-called good thief basically says, 'We're getting what's coming to us, but this guy's innocent.'

And then he adds, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."⁷

And Jesus, true to his ministry as savior, even on the cross, says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."⁸

The second thief does not taunt like the others. Instead he surrenders.

He doesn't rely on his own strength, for indeed there's nothing he can do for himself. He surrenders. And he repents.

³ Lk 23:35

⁴ Lk 23:36

⁵ Lk 23:38

⁶ Lk 23:40-41

⁷ Lk 23:42

⁸ Lk 23:43

The thief in his weakness, realizes something that we often don't. Jesus is Lord, and he's not. Jesus is the savior, and he's not. The other criminal, the Roman soldiers, the Jewish authorities, they're all too sure of themselves. They don't feel they need a savior. And they don't realize that the man on the cross whom they are taunting, the man on the cross who is dying, is dying not only for the world, but for them as well.

The others are comfortable. They're smug. They don't think they need saving. But the repentant criminal places his trust in the crucified Jesus.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that "Every story of conversion is the story of a blessed defeat."⁹ How right that is. When you trust in yourself, you don't think you need a savior. It's only when the reality of the world comes crashing in on you that you realize how powerless you are, and how much you need God's redemptive, saving grace.

Jesus is not being crucified because he is a good man. Jesus is not being crucified because he is a wonderful teacher. Jesus is not being crucified because he is an earthly king. In fact, he has refused the temptations of earthly power and glory.

Jesus is being crucified because he is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And because of that crucifixion, because of his offering of his life on the cross, God uses his death to reconcile all things to himself, and to bring us out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son.

This Christ the King Sunday we celebrate God the Son who humbled himself to become human. We celebrate the creator who chose to dwell with his creation. We celebrate the savior who chose to save others and not himself. And our prayer should be the same as the thief's: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

⁹ From the forward, *Smoke on the Mountain*