

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "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." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

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Christ the King. The phrase can easily bring to mind an image like the icon in the narthex; an image of a gloriously enthroned monarch surrounded by pomp and pageantry. Instead, like the Cranach painting on the front of your bulletin, Luke's Christ is surrounded by criminals crucified with him on crosses intended to display, not hatred, but cruel contempt.

Christ the King. This last Sunday of the liturgical year is a feast day celebrated with us in Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches. We sometimes think of it as a sort of Christian New Year's Eve. And that's not entirely wrong. It is, however, entirely insufficient. The feast of Christ the King is more than the end of one year and the beginning of another.

It's a pivot point; a portal in time. The gates of paradise are open.

And that presents a conundrum for Christian sacred art. The icon of Christ as royal majesty and Cranach's painting of Jesus as despised outcast both depict partial truths. And both point to a larger, encompassing truth that can never be fully described. Together, they bring us – on this feast day – to the cusp of a transcendent truth that must be *lived* if it is to be known.

The readings assigned for this morning prevent us from traipsing merrily along in ignorant bliss, living in the victory of Christ, our Almighty King, who will protect us from all pain and sorrow. At the same time, they also keep us from sitting on ash heaps barely able to tear our eyes away from the bleeding horror of "the man of sorrows" dying on the cross in our place.

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Both of those oversimplified alternatives meet in the paradox found in the letter to the Colossians; a phrase that challenges comfortable habits of thought. And this enigma will draw us into a larger awareness, if we will follow.

Christ is presented as "...the *image* of the *invisible* God..." That is to say, Christ is a visual representation of that which cannot be seen. "...the image of the invisible..."

And what's more, the "image of the invisible God" is the one through whom all things are reconciled to God, having made *peace* by the *blood* of the cross. If we don't try to explain the mystery away, the stress of contemplating this dual paradox grinds a lens for us; bores an opening through which we can gaze at a time-bound human body being tortured to death and yet see beyond into the eternal reign of Christ.

Before we turn our eyes to Advent, before we look for a light to break through the cracks in our dark reality, we have this rare opportunity. We have this feast day to meditate on the remarkable dance between the temporal and the eternal; a living interaction offered nowhere as dramatically as in the image of Christ crucified and risen.

This feast day is ideal for pondering the nature and character of God in what we experience now as the times in between the "already" and the "not yet." Today and the few days before Thanksgiving offer exquisite chances to reflect on the energy of Divine love surrounding and flowing through our lives *as they actually are*.

With practice, we learn to be present to even the most brutal facts of our current reality, whatever they might be, without being swallowed by them. At the same time, we discipline ourselves to maintain the trust that God will prevail, in God's own time and fashion, without being naïvely blind. In time, we learn to resist being distracted by either pessimistic shadows or optimistic shallows.

With practice, we become aware of a new complex emotional response; a sort of melancholy mysticism. It is a feeling of thoughtful heartache that redirects us, always, to our living relationship with the crucified and Risen Christ. And that gives us the ability to groan with hope. We begin to experience and see the beauty of God's outpouring of love on all humanity through the cross of Jesus.

The reign of heaven is not an event. It is not some off-world magical place where good boys and girls are rescued from sorrow or suffering. The

reign of heaven is relational; it involves intimate, true and trusting relationships. And those relationships are more about loving commitments than they are about logical explanations. Even the best of our theological, philosophical and scientific unpacking of relationships fall short of the fullness of experience; especially the experiences lived out in relationship with God.

Let me show you what I mean. My grandmother made gooseberry pies for Thanksgiving. If you've never seen or eaten a pie, I can describe one in a way that might arouse your curiosity. You still won't know what a gooseberry pie tastes like. If you have eaten a blueberry pie, I can describe a gooseberry version that might give you some comparison to consider.

You still won't know what a gooseberry pie tastes like. Not really.

For that, I need to give you a recipe, have you go bake it and bring it back. We'll taste it together and I'll suggest some adjustments. We'll do that until we taste something together that is close enough to my grandmother's pie that I can tell you, "That's it!"

And then you'll know what a gooseberry pie tastes like.

Just so, the institutional church is also not the reign of heaven, although it can often be heaven-*like*. The church is, however, a great place to get recipes. "The image of the invisible God," you see, is the *life* of Christ, not the *church* of Christ. We are a community of the adequate who have experienced sharing in the inheritance of the saints in light. Here, seasoned practitioners pass along spiritual insights and advice that can lead to a genuine taste of the kingdom. There may also possibly be an actual pie recipe or two.

One of the functions of sacred art in the church is to give us vicarious, recoverable experiences, to practice engaging our imaginations to face images of sorrow and suffering so that when real tragedy visits our lives, as it inevitably will, we have some internal resistance. Even so, we don't have to obsess on bloody crucifixes nor do we have to always keep on the sunny side of life.

It is precisely by confronting harsh realities without losing our trust in God that we develop mystic melancholy; that sense of sober resilience in relationship with God who yearns for us. And so, we never have to walk alone. The reign of heaven is relational.

That means there are communities of God's people who have actually walked through some of life's trials. They can use their intimate acquaintance with suffering to see and encourage others. To share in the inheritance of the

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saints in the light is to carry each other's burdens without fixating on the pain, trying to talk each other out of them or pretending they aren't real.

By walking with each other, we learn to live with confidence that the last word about life is God's. And together, we learn to worry less about what happens *after* we die, so that we can tend to the irreplaceable life and relationships God has given us *before* we die.

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