

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

This week we come to the end of the church year, having cycled again through the various seasons which began with the first Sunday of Advent in 2021. We are also coming to the end, incidentally, of our three-year lectionary cycle, and will begin fresh next weekend with Year A, which is built around the witness shared in the Gospel of Matthew. During this past year, we have been prompted to move forward in our faith by the asking of many questions, questions about incarnation, temptation, redemption, resurrection, and so forth, and we end the year with one word on our lips...Jesus. Jesus the king of glory, Jesus the salvation of the world, Jesus our faithful companion through thick and thin, Jesus the way and the truth and the life. It is Christ the King Day, and we are called by the church, by the cyclical calendar of our cherished texts and sacraments, by our faith and by our devotion, to keep the prayers in Jesus' name. It is an honor for me to do that with you today, alongside you as one of the members of Christ's Body.

It might seem a bit surprising to hear Luke's account of the crucifixion this morning, one which would seem more appropriate on Good Friday or at least more relevant during Holy Week, but any introduction to the life of Christ would indeed be incomplete without a witness to this seminal event in his life and ours. Even though it is an event for which Jesus has tried to prepare his followers so that they might appreciate its deep significance and power, it is nonetheless an event which they witness with troubled hearts and fearful souls. Despite all the advance preparation and teaching, they were blindsided, and for the most part, just stood by and watched, mouths probably hanging open in disbelief. The shock and awe of the incident must have seemed completely unrealistic, a horrifying fantasy. It must have been paralyzing, and in fact there is no report that they *did* anything. Some ran away. Some feared for their own lives, no doubt. And some, I'm sure had their faith rattled down to the core.

Our way of recalling those days happens during our celebration of the Eucharist, when we hear again Christ's words which institute the communion elements as his own Body and Blood and proclaim his remarkable sacrifice for the good of the world. But for the most part, we are also just witnesses, whether sitting in our pews or kneeling at some random rail. It is difficult, all these years later, to grasp the full depth of that kind of sacrifice and truly appreciate what our King went through for us. Some thirty years ago, when Gale and I were parishioners of a suburban Onondaga County Episcopal Church, I was tapped as Outreach chairperson. One of my projects involved a partnership with a Pentecostal church in the urban south side of Syracuse. We had come to know this primarily African-American congregation and their clergyperson by participating in their marches against violence in their often-troubled neighborhoods. We had some social and prayer sessions together, got to know and trust each other a bit, broke bread and gave out free hot dogs together at that corner of Salina Street. And then I was able to convince the vestry that we should have a Sunday morning worship service together. At their church building. Our priest and their pastor worked out a liturgy, which would include Holy Communion, and a date was set for this experiment in common cross-denominational worship. It sounded like fun, and most of our Episcopal parishioners were really up for it.

So, I chartered an SOB (no, not the "Star of Bethlehem" or any other thing which might come to mind), a Syracuse-Oswego Bus, and on the appointed morning we made our way from the suburbs

to the south side, dressed-up for church and laden-down with casseroles for coffee-hour. At their church we were enthusiastically welcomed, distributed ourselves among their congregants, sang a mixture of hymns from their tradition and ours, listened to well-prepared readers and sermon messages, and then began the liturgy for Communion. I myself settled in for a meditative hearing of the prayers, closing my eyes as was my habit and listening to the cadence of our priest's resonant voice. But suddenly, as the text turned to the words of institution, I was startled to hear noises from those seated around me. First there was a low rush of whispering, then outright moans and sobs, and as we began hearing about Christ's sacrifice on the cross there were unexpected shrieks and startling cries of suffering and pain. Our hosts in that Pentecostal church seemed to be actually feeling the agony of the experience. What was I missing? I wondered; What was missing from my own understanding of that liturgy? Was I just a bystander to the crucifixion? Was I just a witness from the distant future, unable to know fully the cost of Jesus' love for me?

And then, when the liturgy turned to the proclamations of resurrection, I began hearing shouts of affirmation, loud Amens and exclamations of agreement. Again I had to wonder what might be missing in the depth of my experience of this familiar sacrament. I began to wonder, too, if our hosts might scratch their heads and wonder at my lack of enthusiasm, questioning my sacramental commitment and even my faithfulness. It gave me much to think about and many new important questions to ask. It also gave me a rich appreciation for those with whom I knelt together at that altar rail that morning. And a fresh joy at being a companion member of the King's Body. You may notice, though, that Luke seems to be far less interested in the suffering of the King than in his attitude, behavior, and proclamations in these crucifixion moments of crisis. Surely, there is physical suffering, and pain, and probably humiliation, too, but hear what Jesus says: Father forgive them, he prays, and then with reassurance invites the condemned to join him in paradise. This is a King who, unlike the standard royal example in those days, is more interested in the welfare of others than in his own; a shepherd, as Jeremiah says, who can set aside even his own discomfort, and attacks on his personal integrity, to tend to his fold and pray for his flock.

So, who is this King whom we worship and adore? What is this new covenant he chooses to make with us? What motivates him? What sustains him? What decrees will he initiate? These questions lead us forward, even though we may never fully or scientifically come to conclusions or answers. And, given the King's example, our foremost question in every instance remains: "what is the faithful thing to do now?" St. Paul, writing during his imprisonment to the little congregation of the Colossians, directs our inquiry about the nature of Christ the King by witnessing to what he has learned: That Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God, bearing all the creativity, mercy, and fullness of the one who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Jesus holds all things together, he writes, that we might be reassured and rescued from chaos. And Jesus is the head of the church, too, directing and encouraging all those things which the members of that Body are called to do. And all this peace is made, and made possible, through the blood of his cross. In a few moments I will invite you to join me in celebrating our connection to Jesus' covenant by the sacrament of Holy Communion, either physically with the elements upon which we will ask God's blessing or spiritually in devoted prayer. And you may moan and shriek as much or as little as you wish during the liturgy. But I pray that your enthusiasm will be for the nourishment, the affirmation, and the mutual affection we experience in presence of our King's glory. Long live the holy and resurrected King. Amen