

## SCRIPTURE

### Luke 23:33-43

<sup>33</sup> 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. [[<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” <sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” <sup>42</sup> Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” <sup>43</sup> He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

## SERMON

On Christ the King Sunday our lectionary scripture describes Jesus’ last moments on the cross – hardly what we would consider a kingly image. Certainly not what we would expect on the day that we declare Jesus ruler over all. Our king, stripped, bloodied, humiliated – dying. A curious way to recognize a king.

This seems to be pretty far off the mark. How did we end up here? Is this the best bible passage that we could find to represent the Son of God in all his glory? Does this reflect the power and splendour of the creator of the cosmos? Actually, yes. Yes it does. To understand why we need to look at the message of the Bible as a whole, starting at the very beginning.

At the time that Genesis was written there were a number of competing explanations of how creation came to be. The Babylonians had Tiamat and Marduk, the Greeks had Gaia, Uranus, and Chronos, not much survives of the Sumerian creation story, though some of the later history is recorded.

What is common among these early creation stories is violence. Creation is a violent business. Marduk kills his mother Tiamat and fashions the world from her corpse. Chronos kills his father and eats all his own children. It’s a god eat god world out there – the ancient world was born in violence and that is its perpetual state.

In contrast, the Jewish creation story did not feature a God fashioning the cosmos from the corpse of his enemies; life does not come originate in death, and God did not have to destroy in order to create. Yahweh created everything from of nothing. A pure creation, a positive creation. At each stage of creation God provided, nurtured, and blessed. This is a radically different concept of creation – and really fits the word creation better – than the other origin stories. The Jewish God is a benevolent provider, not a blood thirsty power seeker.

So, right from the very beginning of the Bible our expectations and worldly wisdom are challenged and turned inside out. In a world in which gods are expected to be violent, angry, and arbitrary, the Jewish God is a caring provider. Not self serving, but rather with a heart for his creation.

This pattern continues. Most cultures have a flood story – frightening chaos of water and destruction unleashed by displeased Gods. The basic storyline is that people grow bad, the gods get angry, and the gods destroy humanity. In most of the recounting there is one plucky family that survives by planning ahead, or as in the Sumerian version, they receive a warning from one of the gods who defies the rest of them.

The Genesis flood story starts off like the others, but in this one a family is saved, not through accident but through design, by meticulous and detailed planning by God. A promise is made, a relationship is established. We are not left with a picture of a God who is enraged and seeks satisfaction through destruction – paying a blood debt. It is an image of a God who seeks to cleanse and recreate beginning with a covenant relationship.

The flood story, as with the creation story, contains surprisingly compassionate and progressive elements. Though these stories were composed in a brutal and violent time, they describe a God who does not derive pleasure from vengeance and destruction, but chooses instead to nurture and provide.

This theme is repeated over and over in the Hebrew Testament. Consider the story of Jonah, sent to call the Assyrians to repentance. The Assyrians, to the Jews, were the worst of the worst; mean, brutish, oppressive. They had killed thousands of Israelites, enslaved thousands more. God sent Jonah to Nineveh, in order to save these terrible people.

We're familiar with what happened next: Jonah immediately got on a boat headed the opposite direction and God had to use some imaginative and incredible techniques to get Jonah headed back where he was supposed to go, with Jonah kicking and fighting the whole while.

This whole ordeal was God challenging Jonah, and through him all of Israel, to forgive the Assyrians – and through this become the channel of God's healing love to them. God is not pleased to smite an entire nation, instead he seeks reconciliation, wholeness. God wants to defeat Israel's enemies not just by making them friends, but joining them together into one family under his Lordship.

Again and again, this God of the Jews turns away from violence and oppression in favour of invitation and welcome.

One last example before we return to the portrayal of our King. Let's look at one of the hardest scriptures in the Old Testament and see what it reveals about our God – the sacrifice of Isaac. To most moderns this is a particularly bloodthirsty text and most of us struggle with it.

The story begins with God demanding that Abraham take his son, the son of the covenant, the most precious thing in his life, and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. To us this is a shocking concept – not so much to people in Abraham’s day. Notice that Abraham didn’t protest or resist – he simply accepted this command.

To us sacrifice is hard to understand, it’s hard to get into the mindscape of the ancients. To them it was part of the natural order of things. So much of the world was beyond their understanding and control; the gods determined such things as rain, sun, storms, the health of flocks and families, fertility, good fortune. And the gods of the day were fickle and arbitrary – it was difficult to keep them happy.

When your livelihood depends on the whim of the gods you had to frequently offer sacrifices – but how do you know if your sacrifice is acceptable? You may find out later, if the drought breaks, or your child is born safely, but when the sacrifice is being made there is no assurance at all. This puts a great deal of pressure on to provide sacrifices of higher and higher quality – offerings of prayer and service, then grains and the fruits of the fields. What about meat – meat is a high quality sacrifice, especially choice cuts of meat. That’s a good sacrifice, and should be pleasing to a god.

The very best sacrifice could be offered would be your very self, or your child. It’s hard to say which would be costlier – sacrifice of self seems to be the pinnacle, but the sacrifice of a child is actually the sacrifice of the entire future. If the point of sacrifice is a complete abasement of self before a capricious god, then living with the knowledge that you have given up on the future in its entirety is surely an abject surrender that cannot be topped.

The point is that when the gods demand sacrifice, you do it without question. There is no negotiation.

So, like the flood, the sacrifice of Isaac begins in a familiar and predictable vein, and then is abruptly turned on its head.

As Abraham and his son climb the mountain to give God his due, God interrupts the sacrifice to give to Abraham. God commanded that Abraham stop what he was doing and instead offer up a ram that God himself provided.

When we first read this story we immediately ask ‘what kind of God would ask a man to sacrifice his son?’ The answer is, not this God. Other gods may demand your firstborn – most of them do - our God does not.

Typically we understand worship and sacrifice to be about giving to God, but God turned the tables with Abraham. God didn’t accept a sacrifice, God provided the sacrifice. God does not demand, but instead gives and blesses. Indeed, by the end of the story Abraham and Isaac came down from the mountain with a blessing that God said would be so great that the blessing could not be contained by Abraham or Isaac, nor even by their entire tribe, but that

blessing would flow through them to encompass the entire world. Not just those who love and obey, but all people on earth.

So, we have here a God who does not have to kill to create. God does not create life through the death of something else – God brings forth life from his very being.

We have a God who establishes relationships and covenants, in which he is the guaranteeing party, not us.

We have a God who himself wants to forgive those who hurt his children, and who wants us to do the same – not keep violence circulating though seeking retribution.

And we have a God who does not seek sacrifice to satisfy his ego. We don't have a God who demands and takes, but a God who provides and blesses.

This is the God who has provided us a King to rule over us. If all of these previous stories started off rather predictably then took a radical turn toward love and service, then we might expect that the story of our King would also be surprising – outside of our worldly norms. And that is exactly what we find.

Normally we would envision a king who enjoys prosperity, position, power, and pedigree. I think in the back of our minds we all know that those who rule us are not necessarily any better than us, they are simply more privileged, and we fully expect them to take advantage of that privilege. That is why we are not surprised at the antics of rulers who are brash, boastful, immature, petulant, impulsive and generally intolerable. Most of us are aware that if we were suddenly given great power we would also likely become self-serving autocrats as well.

Jesus the king doesn't fit the worldly mold at all. We encounter him this morning, one of three criminals nailed to a crucifix, spread open, naked and vulnerable with his executors tossing dice for his clothing. Derided and mocked by the religious leaders, the soldiers, even by the man dying beside him. Jesus, the most powerful being on earth, allowed himself to be treated this way. Why?

The entire Bible portrays God as a creator, a provider, one who doesn't respond in violence. Jesus is simply following the path of his Father, demonstrating the same characteristics of compassion and patience. Not powerless – not a victim – but longsuffering, willing to endure humiliation and even death so that some among us might catch a glimpse of the true nature of God and step out of the cycle of death and ravishment that the world dictates to us.

This image of a suffering king is anathema to many. It goes so against our expectations that we outright reject the image of Golgotha, even within the church. During the springtime of Christianity, the most popular artistic representations of Christ were as the crucified One, the Good Shepherd, and sometimes the plain man on the mount of Transfiguration, glowing with the radiance of God.

But, once Christianity became an established religion, backed by state power, we stepped back from this non-violent messenger of love and made him something he was not. We painted Christ as triumphal and majestic – wearing rich robes with a crown on his head, seated on a golden throne.

We also depict him as one who has learned from the mistaken leniency of his first coming, one who is eagerly waiting to return with the sword of destruction and armies and fire to subdue the earth and fix what he missed the first time.

But in truth, our King has not changed. We have. Our King is still the man on the cross, he who says ‘Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.’

Our King is the Son whom God sent into the world, not to condemn, but so that the entire world would be saved through him.

Our King remains the humble one with the crown of thorns. Who welcomes sinners and eats with them; who does not demand satisfaction but provides for all who encounter him; who does not condemn but invites us to repentance and reconciliation.

Jesus is the King who has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into his own kingdom;  
a realm of good news,  
hope, love, hospitality,  
and regard for the poor and marginalized.

Make no mistake. That man from Galilee, the one that so many continue to underestimate and hold to no account is the very image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.

In him all things were created  
in heaven and on earth,  
things visible and invisible,  
whether thrones or empires,  
principalities or other authorities.

He is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body of the church,  
the beginning and the first-born from the dead,  
and in everything he has no equal.

In Christ all the fullness of God  
was happy to come and live,  
and through him all things shall be reconciled,  
whether on earth or in heaven,  
making peace by the blood of his cross.

Amen.