

## Christ the King/ Engeland Baptism

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as a king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.* Jeremiah 23:5

*He is the head of the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.* Colossians 1: 19

*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.* Luke 23:33

Today is the last Sunday of our church year, the day of Christ the King. And our new lectionary cycle, the Revised Common Lectionary, makes it very clear what kind of a king we are worshipping, how a king anointed by God is meant to reign, and what kind of a kingship this king, this Messiah of God, had here on earth.

In previous years, with the former readings, we would hear in the Gospel about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – the Palm Sunday portion. Or we would hear about Jesus in the Judgment seat, separating sheep from goats. We would hear about all things being subjected under God's feet. And we would sing those triumphal, imperialistic hymns, which we still sing.

And to counter all that I would preach about how Jesus of Nazareth lived out his own kingship, a life of self-emptying and service, a radical counterpart to how the world images royalty and royal destiny. But today's Gospel tells all that in the starkest of terms. *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.* That's it . That's how that glorious kingship came to its ignominious, humiliating, excruciating conclusion.

Or is it? Because here we are 2000 years later, about to welcome Molly and Will Emmett Engeland into the body of Christ through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Their parents and godparents will promise to *be responsible for seeing that William and Molly are brought up in the Christian faith and life, by their prayers and witness help them grow into the full stature of Christ; and on William and Molly's behalf to renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God; all sinful desires that draw them from the love of God; to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as their Savior; to put their whole trust in Christ's grace and love; and to follow and obey him as their Savior.*

They will promise all this in the name of the one who was crucified there *with criminals, one on his right and one on his left*. I can't say this is the Gospel I would have chosen as ideal for a baptismal Sunday, a time always for special rejoicing here at St. John's. But as Episcopalians we observe the discipline of the lectionary cycle, and that means that we are reading and hearing and praying the same Scripture not only as our fellow Anglicans throughout the world, but as the Roman Church and 16 Protestant denominations. Many, many Christians today are pondering the meaning of the kingship of Christ, and it is into that worldwide companionship and community of believers that we welcome Molly and Will today.

Moreover, our Gospel reading for today gives us truth in advertising: we are given no false and glittering images of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We are not promised a life free from pain and suffering, free from conflict and struggle, free from hostility, mockery, and misunderstanding. We are not promised a life free from death; indeed, in the Baptism over Water we will pray in remembrance that we *are buried with Christ in death*. But at the same time we are promised and reminded that we *share in Christ's resurrection*.

So we are promise resurrection, new life in Christ. What can that possibly mean? Well, it's a mystery in many ways. But I think there's a pointer in Jeremiah's vision of David's kingship: *and he shall reign as a king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land*. The new life in Christ will be one where justice and righteousness are the order of the day. And to be born again into that new life means that we are a part of that reign, not as submissive subjects but as active participants, as we promise to *strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being*. So to be baptized into a life in Christ means that we pledge ourselves and bind ourselves not to an earthly ruler, not to the powers and principalities, but to a life of justice-seeking and peacemaking.

And what does it mean *to be buried with Christ in death*? That may seem even more mysterious – and perhaps less desirable – than new life. What I have learned to believe this means is that death is no longer the last word, death no longer has the power to vanquish or defeat us. That is, the *fear* of death no longer has that power.

I was talking recently with a parishioner who lost his father not long ago. He was speaking of the sense he has now of the presence of his deceased parents in his life – *not as ghosts*, he said, but as presences who are helping somehow to manage his life, and who see him more clearly than they perhaps did while living. I said that I knew and shared that

feeling exactly. Of course, many traditions have theories and theologies about the dead and afterlife, and the sense that the beloved ones whom we've lost are still with us is not exclusive to Christianity.

What is special about our Christian belief is that we are bound with those loved ones together in Christ, that our death and birth in Christ's life unites us in some mysterious and gracious way to those who have gone before us into the arms of God. And if we follow that meaning a bit further with our reading today from Colossians, we hear *that God has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light. God has rescued us from darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

And so, when we feel the presence of those loved others, we are feeling their light and their sainthood and joining with them in it. We are joined with them in God's rescue of all of us from darkness, God's forgiveness, God's redemption. This may sound abstract and esoteric, but part of what we can believe, because so many of us have experienced this with those we have loved and lost, is a spiritual reality of mutual forgiveness. We can believe that with the dead, we have embarked on a new relationship of understanding and forbearance, a relationship of resurrected life. They are not vanished from us; they are different, just as Jesus was different when he returned to visit his friends.

And so this baptism we celebrate, and this kingship we celebrate, are all bound up with the mysteries of death and new life, the mysteries of relationships that transcend time and space and the boundaries of our earthly existence. It is these mysteries into which we baptize, and we welcome, Molly and Will. And it is with this promise: *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.. Alleluia, Amen.*