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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Proper 29C)

November 20, 2016

Text: Luke 23:27–43

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today's collect makes a very curious and surprising assertion. Keep in mind, this is a prayer. The collects prayerfully states, "Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of the cross." King Jesus, our Lord and Savior, reigns among us by the preaching of the cross! Shouldn't it say something like Jesus reigns among us by the preaching of God's Word or by His sheer divine power and majesty?

While those latter statements are true, they don't take us to the heart of the saving Gospel. The question we must always ask ourselves is how does God come among us graciously with His saving will. If He comes to me, a contaminated sinner stained with original and actual sin, only according to His unveiled divine glory, I will not experience His mercy, grace, or salvation. When the prophet Isaiah saw God, majestic, high and lifted up upon His throne, Isaiah pronounced a prophetic woe upon himself. He was undone for he was a sinner living among sinners (Is. 6). That's not how we want Christ ruling among us.

Even when we consider God's Word, we must ask whether whatever passage we are reading is God's Law or God's Gospel. God's Law is true and good and beautiful. But it is, ultimately, a word of condemnation for all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). God's Law makes no allowances for falling short of God's majestic glory revealed in His Word. "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'" (Gal. 3:10). That's not how we want Christ ruling among us.

Instead, we want Christ ruling among us through the preaching of His cross, through the preaching of the Gospel of life and forgiveness! The apostle Paul boldly preaches to the Corinthian Christians, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Cor. 1:18). And then he preaches, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and

him crucified...so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (I Cor. 2:2, 5).

The power of God unto salvation for every man, woman, and child, is the preaching of the crucified Jesus. Through that message, the Savior Jesus Christ rules and reigns among us for our eternal good and joy. Today’s reading publicly portrays King Jesus ruling and extending His beloved Church through His Gospel salvation. It shows the way of faith, forgiveness, and eternal blessedness. It’s a picture of the Church!

Listen to the titles given to Jesus in this gospel reading: the “Christ of God” (vs. 35), the Father’s “Chosen One” (vs. 35), the King of the Jews (vs. 37, 38), the Christ (vs. 39), and then the repentant thief describes Jesus as having a kingdom (vs. 42). These are titles and phrases only applicable to an anointed King exercising authority over His kingdom.

But isn’t it a peculiar vision of our divine, gracious King? It began with Jesus being led to His place of crucifixion, a place called the Skull (vs. 33). Following Him were women mourning and lamenting for Him for they know that Jesus is being led to His cruel death (vs. 27). The King’s message is quite strange, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’” (vs. 29)

Sincere though your tears may be, don’t weep for Me, says Jesus, for I go to receive my eternal kingdom appointed from all eternity by God the Father. But the days are coming when this earthly city of Jerusalem, this capital city of Israel, will be so decimated by suffering, plague, famine, and death that those inside will say it would have been better never to have been born. So says Jesus.

In other words, do not, O Church of God, look to the kingdoms of this world for happiness, joy, and security. Every earthly kingdom and every earthly rule will fall. Only His kingdom will endure to all eternity. And the characteristic of His kingdom is the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23). Yes, this preaching of the cross, by which Jesus reigns among His people, appears weak and foolhardy. But to us who believe, the preaching of the cross is life and salvation and all the blessings of heaven and earth.

This vision of King Jesus continues to develop as He is crucified between two criminals at the place of the Skull (vs. 32–33). The very first word we hear from crucified Jesus as He rules from His cross is “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (vs. 34). That is the divine proclamation of the King Himself! Forgiveness! Sins are not to be held against sinners. Keep in the mind what’s going on as Jesus pronounces forgiveness.

Our Lord is not dying for His sins or crimes but for the sins and crimes of the world; your sins, my sins. Jesus is dying as a condemned criminal. Roman soldiers are gambling around Him, trying to win our Lord’s clothing (vs. 34). In other words, Jesus is dying naked and exposed before all the world as the soldiers play sport with His clothing. The crowd is standing off at a distance, passive and silent. The rulers of the people scoff at Jesus. Look at this man, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers join in the grisly fun by offering sour wine and mocking the Lord with similar words of derision, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (vs. 35–37). One of the criminals joins in by saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (vs. 39).

Do you hear the Satanic enticement here? Come down from the cross. People won’t believe in and don’t want a suffering, dying Savior. We want a god who can first of all save Himself, who can show everyone who’s boss with raw displays of power and divine majesty. But that’s *not* how this King rules over His kingdom. That’s *not* how He saves His beloved people. Jesus establishes His kingdom and rules and reigns by saving His people instead of Himself. In the preaching of Jesus crucified for the world, we hear the King’s divine absolution, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”

This vision of King Jesus continues to develop further in the next scene. One criminal has already asked Jesus to save Himself by coming off the cross, alive! But the second criminal rebukes the first with a powerful confession of repentance and faith, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (vs. 40–41).

This horrible death, we deserve. But Jesus does not. Don’t you fear God? This Man is dying for us. Haven’t you heard His word of forgiveness? Don’t you see His love for us in *not* saving Himself? He’s dying for us; to save us; to forgive us.

And then we see and hear a most beautiful image of Christ's Church in the words of faith spoken by a dying but believing criminal, "Jesus, remember when you come into your kingdom." (vs. 42). Sinners gathered around a crucified Savior. That's the Church! When the love of the crucified Jesus is preached, condemned sinners are "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of (the Father's) beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13–14). For the King speaks again, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (vs. 43). The dying criminal's prayer is answered! Forgiveness! Salvation! Eternal life!

Dear saints of God, this is the life and hope of the Church until the end of time: Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of Your cross. Everything we do must be done in that bold faith and confidence. Jesus didn't save Himself; He died to save us. We don't save ourselves; He saves us through His cross, just like the believing criminal with the promise of paradise.

Real sinners with real sins are forgiven in this place with the crucified Jesus is preached. Men, women, and children who are guilty of avarice, haughty pride, perversion, malice, bitterness, fornication, wrath, debauchery, dissensions, drunkenness, corrupt communication of every sort, idolatry and every form of misbelief, you name it. Where Jesus' cross is preached, there sinners are forgiven and promised eternal life.

Sermons, Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution, the liturgy we use in our worship, all of them, are all a preaching of Jesus' cross. No matter what promises or perils that come in the near and distant future, these means of preaching the cross of Jesus can never be abandoned or muted. "For in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:19–20). In the preaching of Jesus' cross, you are forgiven. In the preaching of His cross, you have the promise of paradise, today and for all eternity. This is how Jesus wants to reign among us!

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.