

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 20th November, 2022

Gospel Luke 23:33-43

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. 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!'* 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.'*



You might be surprised by the image that I've chosen for today... Or you might not.

I freely acknowledge that it's an odd one for "Reign of Christ" Sunday, and even more so if we go by the traditional title of "Christ the King". As we can see, it's an Easter image.

But I believe very strongly that this picture is more like Jesus of the Gospels, than the portrayals of him that have come to us through our western Christian traditions. These are the traditions of kingship, empire, power, and politics that have shaped the language and images that we use today: the language of "Christendom".

Like many other Christian people, I am quite pleased to see the end of Christendom. And, mostly, I'm excited to live in a time when churches are looking for and authentic ways to be people of Jesus in a changing world.

(I believe we have been in this situation for the whole life of the Uniting Church, and several decades before, and I am tremendously grateful for all of the wonderful leaders of the past and present who have helped me/us live with faith and grace in these tricky times!)

But, also like many others, my challenge has been to honour Jesus and worship the GOD to whom he points, while moving away from the language and 'power games' of Christendom.

I've needed to look for different words and images, for sure, but also to acknowledge how the culture in which I have been raised shapes my thinking. This was brought home to me when I

visited churches and cathedrals in Europe several years ago, and saw things like carvings of angels with swords, and battle imagery and triumphalism everywhere. I remember sitting in a cathedral in France trying to work out why everything I was seeing was so jarring to my sense of Jesus.

And so for me, images like the Easter one are actually very helpful in re-shaping the way I think about the glory of GOD, about how I honour Jesus' way of living with power and hope.

It shows much:

- the adoring crowd of 'Palm Sunday', turning on him later on.
- The one sharing the bread and wine with his friends, showing them the way of love.
- the arrested, and crucified one, vulnerable, wrongfully accused, and disposed of,
- the risen one, exalted, and vindicated by GOD.

People of GOD, here is your king! With hands open in welcome, in forgiveness and compassion, the reign of Christ is held before us. Thanks be to GOD!