

Reading: Luke 23:33-43

*Loving Jesus you hung on the cross in a new kind of kingship.*

*Help us to learn from your example. Amen*

The dying Vicar asked that her lawyer and her accountant be present at her bedside as she died. "As I slip into the next life" she said, "I want you to hold my hands, one each side". So, they did. After about an hour of this, the lawyer became impatient. "Why are we here and how long this is going to go on for?" "Oh", said the vicar, "I wanted to die like Jesus, with a criminal on one side and a thief on the other".

In case you think I'm being nasty to lawyers, it was Edgar Bradley, that well known Timaru solicitor, who told me this story. Today's reading is Luke's account of the crucifixion of Jesus, and this can seem a random reading to have at this time of year, especially as we are about to get ready to celebrate Christmas. But this Sunday is set down as Christ the King Sunday and is the last Sunday of the church's year. So, this reading is telling us something about Jesus our King. But what?

God's chosen Messiah, Jesus, is not one who comes in triumphant conquest, but the one who comes suffering for the sake of others. Jesus, by his death on the cross, provides a different image of kingship. In the midst of his own suffering, Jesus shows the true marks of leadership and the marks of a Christian life. He shows compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Compassion, love, and forgiveness are so different from what we associate with leadership and our role models.

The passage opens with Jesus asking God's forgiveness on these people who crucified him. We can read this and not give it a moment's thought, or maybe we have read it so often it's stopped meaning much. But pause for a moment and think of all that Jesus has been through. He has been arrested, taken from his friends, spat on, whipped within an inch of his life, made to carry his own cross until he could no longer walk, had nails driven into his hands and feet, and then been lifted with these nailed hands and feet as support, all the while being pierced by the crown of thorns on his head. He has been subjected to physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering beyond most of our imaging, and what is his response? His response is forgiveness. This isn't cheap grace, the "Oh don't worry about it. Everything is okay," sort of forgiveness. This is costly forgiveness.

You might say, "It is all very well this forgiveness stuff, but Jesus was special. Such forgiveness can't be expected of us." But ordinary human beings can find it in their hearts to forgive even the most dreadful atrocity. This prayer was found on the walls of Ravensbruck concentration camp:

*O Lord remember not only the men and woman of good will but those of ill will. Do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have bought thanks to this suffering, our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown because of all this, and when they come to judgement let all the fruits that they have bourn be their forgiveness.*

In the midst of such terrible suffering, I believe we see humanity at its most noble when it is able to pray for its enemies like this.

Jesus' love and compassion extends to those that others regard as worthless, even on the cross. Rebuked by one of the criminals, Jesus chooses rather to affirm the one who asks him to remember him, and offers him the greatest gift of all, eternal life.

This is a different sort of kingship. It is not about commanding others or having great power, it's about drawing from the very heart of God, the heart of love.

So often we hear demands for strong leadership, leadership which will do this or that. Only very quietly, if at all, do we hear the cry for compassionate leadership, forgiving leadership, leadership that loves the criminal and the sinner.

What would kingship like this look like in life? This week the Church remembered Elizabeth of Hungary. Elizabeth was born in 1207. She married to Ludwig, the king of Hungary, whom she loved very much. Elizabeth and her husband devoted themselves to helping the poor, and her husband gave her huge sums to support her work. She funded hospitals and orphanages in particular. After 7 years of happy marriage, Ludwig died, and her grief was inconsolable. To make a bad situation worse her son was taken from her by her brother-in-law, because he was the heir to the crown of Hungary. She was tuned out of the royal castle and began begging for food. She became a Franciscan and was put under the oversight of a harsh inquisitor who made her life a living hell. The resulting poverty and hunger lead to her early death at 24. The last four years of her life she spent, although in ill health herself, caring for the poor and sick. She always had great charm and humour and was reported to be the most beautiful woman in the world. On her death the poor of the city came by the thousands to mourn her as one of their own. Her body thrown into a humble grave.

Compassion, forgiveness, love, these where the marks of Elizabeth's life and death as they were of Jesus'. But what of us?

Most of us aren't princesses or princes but we are all members of the royal priesthood of believers. What principles govern our behaviour towards others? In our own family do we use our power as parents to lord it over our kids, telling them what to do at every opportunity? Are we gentle with those we find it hard to understand and tolerate? Are we quick to forgive to allow the other to start over, or do we hold a grudge forever and a day? Do we look for the good in the others, even the criminal? I'm told even accountants and lawyers have good hearts. Do we ask to be relieved from our suffering or do we offer it to

God? In all this we need the grace and good humour of Elizabeth of Hungary - even if we don't have the good looks.

We believe that the suffering of Jesus points to a new kind of kingdom, to a new reign, a reign of love.

Anthony Padovano writes...

*The suffering on the cross is meant not for itself but for something else. Christ does not suffer because suffering is of itself a value but because love without restraint requires suffering...*

*It is not the physical death of Jesus which saves, but the love of Jesus for us even unto death...*

*The crucified Jesus is a sign... that love may suffer but it overcomes...*

*The person of faith has found in Jesus a hope stronger than history*

*And a love mightier than death.*

Do we believe and trust in this love mightier and stronger than death? Does it govern our relationships? Are we, as Christ, servant leaders?

Let us pray:

*Saviour hanging on the cross, declaring God's love to us, you are forgiveness. Beside you hangs a thief, beneath you waits Mary the forgiven and all around, watch those many people to whom you give new life and hope. To us you give new life and hope. We forgiven sinners become your body and your church. May the reconciliation we share so shape our lives that we live according to your gospel, now and forever.*