

Pluscarden Abbey: Homilies

Christ the King, 2007

On Good Friday we listen each year to the Passion according to John. And that Gospel has a high-point, a climax, one of those moments when the inner meaning of what's happening suddenly shines out. It occurs as Jesus dies on the Cross. Instead of breaking his legs, one of the soldiers pierces his side with a lance. "And immediately there came out blood and water." In that flow from the pierced side of Christ, that opening of a spring in his body, shines out the whole cleansing and life-giving force his death and resurrection have released into human life, their power to transform, to bring about something new here and now, and hereafter, and for ever.

Now today, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, the solemnity of Christ the Universal King, we find ourselves again, by the power of the Gospel we've just heard, standing by the Cross, watching Jesus. We have heard a passage from the Passion according to Luke. And this passage, too, is a high-point, a climax, one of those moments when the inner meaning of what's happening suddenly shines out, is caught in a single event. Jesus has been crucified. He is dying. He is among the dregs of humanity, as one of them himself. He is dying under successive volleys of abuse, jeered at by the Jewish authorities, mocked by the Governor's soldiers, taunted by one of the criminals. He is dying under the only words we know to have been written about him during his life: "This is the King of the Jews." And that is why he has been condemned: he so clearly wasn't that, wasn't the Messiah. And then quite unexpectedly, in the midst of all this, one of the criminals speaks up. He lets fly at his fellow, admits the justice of their sentence, affirms the innocence of Jesus: "this man has done nothing wrong", and then, quite astonishingly, acknowledges the kingship of Jesus: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And, more astonishingly still, Jesus replies, "Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise."

And here in this exchange, here is caught and condensed and symbolized the whole meaning of what was really happening: the forgiving, acquitting, life-giving meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ, its capacity to take any of us, however down among the dregs we are, somewhere else, somewhere better, here and hereafter and for ever. "Indeed, I promise you, today I will be with you in paradise."

Is Christ a "king" then? Yes, we say, but not in the sense in which other kings are kings. Yes, we say, but in a different, higher, transcendent sense. He is, as St Benedict says, the "true King", the real king. He is the King of the Jews, in the messianic sense, the successor of anointed David, and therefore King of the Gentiles too. He is even, as St Paul was saying, the first-born of all creation, and the first-born from the dead. He is the universal King, as today's feast proclaims him. But what does this mean? If one goes back to the origins of kingship, some 5,000 years ago, back to ancient Sumer, to the marshes of southern Iraq where the Tigris and Euphrates converge before they flow into the Persian Gulf, or back to ancient Egypt and the banks of the Nile, and if one looks at the ancient artefacts that picture kings what one often sees at or under their feet is a crouching, humbled man (or many). It was threats from outside, it was enemies, it was the need of cities or peoples for self-defence that gave rise to kings, and kings were for putting enemies under our feet. Kings were for war. Kings were for victory over evil.

Is Christ a "king" then? Yes, we say, but not in the sense in which other kings are kings. Yes, we say, but in a different, higher, transcendent sense. Yes, we say, precisely when being jeered at for not being such a king, precisely when under the heels of injustice, he was showing himself such par excellence. He is the only king who really, finally, does what, for all our cynicism, we always dimly hope for from every kind of leader: he rescues us from evil and guards or restores our paradise. He rescues us, St Paul will clarify, from our deepest and darkest, our reallest and most threatening enemies, sin and death, and he brings us into a quite new place, into new relationships, with the Father, with one another, with the world, here and now, and hereafter and for ever. "Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus, on the Cross, does the kingly thing par excellence. He doesn't have anyone crouching, licking dust at his feet. He forgives, he acquits, he shows mercy, he bestows. He makes a criminal a king.

On Good Friday, the power of Christ's death and resurrection shines out in the flow of blood and water. Today it shines out in the last human exchange of Jesus' life. And as we leave this liturgical year, we might leave wondering, does it, can it shine out from us? How can I enter into the kingship Christ gives me? And the Gospel gives the answer. There is nothing so regal, there is nothing that so gives us back our humanity, there is nothing that so lifts the darkness, there is nothing that so brings paradise into our hearts and the world to Christ as forgiving, forgiving the very people we'd love to have crouching under our feet, forgiving (at least being ready to forgive) our enemies, loving the unlovely. For there, par excellence, Christ is King.

Abbot Hugh, O. S. B.