



## **Why the Cross Matters**

### **Reflections on Reign of Christ Sunday, Jesus' Death and U2**

Today return to the cross. Today is the last Sunday of this church year. Next Sunday, we will begin a new church year with Advent coming next week. I find it interesting that this Sunday, our last Sunday before Advent, when we enter into a time of preparing for Jesus' birth, we stop and reflect on his death. This Sunday is known as Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. It is a special Sunday that was most recently added to our liturgical calendar just a hundred years ago.

This special Sunday came about because around 100 years ago, it was a time of rising nationalism and the Pope hoped to remind folks that Christ reigns in our hearts, minds, intentions and actions. In some Christian traditions it is called, 'the return of the Christ'.

And so today, we celebrate 'the return of the Christ' through the scripture passage of his death, of his time on the cross. This isn't a story about Jesus' ministry. This isn't a story that involves a parable, a healing, a miracle. There are no devout crowds, no people climbing trees for a view of this esteemed healer and teacher. There are no admirers, no supporters. He is called King of the Jews in mockery not in love or respect.

Typically, we encounter this story during holy week, where for the many weeks of Lent, we had turned to Jerusalem with Jesus; we entered the city with him on Palm Sunday, we encountered him in the temple, we were with him as he ate one last meal with his friends and disciples, we heard about him praying in solitude, struggling with doubt and fear.

Typically, we encounter this story during holy week. It is Friday's story and while it is a hard story on Friday, we know that Sunday is coming, we know there will be more to the story. Yet

today, we have none of that prelude or lead in. And not only do we not have the prelude, the walk to the cross but we don't have Sunday. We don't have Easter.

We just have this story. We just have the cross. An instrument of Roman torture. Reserved for those the Roman Empire thought were especially dangerous, political opponents. Crucifixion was excruciatingly painful. It was undoubtedly, one of the cruelest and most humiliating forms of punishment in the ancient world. The Jewish historian Josephus best described it following the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 66-70 as "the most wretched of deaths. Jesus' death was a gruesome civil execution. He suffered, of that there can be no question.

Over the centuries, Christians have struggled mightily to make sense of this brutal and tragic story, this death story. Theologians for centuries have debated the meaning of this story. My childhood faith tradition left me with the deep impression that this death was a sacrifice to God in repayment for our sin. For most of my adult life I have strongly rejected the notion of that atoning death. It did not in any way align with my evolving personal theology built around nonviolence, justice and divine life-giving love. I do not believe that Jesus' death was sanctioned, planned, needed, or called for by my God.

I do believe that Jesus' death has meaning. I do believe that as with his birth, life and resurrection, his death matters and it is a critical part of his story and of our story. Jesus' mission was to love, to heal, to lift up the low, to find and reconcile the lost, to welcome to un-welcome-able and to show us a way to draw near to his Abba, our God. This way was through love, through all of those actions that made up his ministry, it came across in what he preached, through his radical welcoming actions, his freewheeling healing, his engagement with those who no one wanted at their table, his way was love. That was his life, his preaching and his ministry.

He showed that love by calling his disciples to follow him, women and men forming a new type of community and showed a special resonance for the marginal people of society, calling them back into life-giving relationship with other people and with God. He showed that love by sitting in fellowship with people who were not welcome at other tables. He showed that love by offering a restored sense of dignity and peace before God for those who were outcasts. He showed that love by rooting his ministry in prayer and deep communion with his Abba. He enacted the reign of God and revealed God among us. Through his ministry and his acts of radical love and hospitality, Jesus revealed God's love. Or as one of my seminary professors used to say, if you are curious about God, look at the actions of Jesus. He loved. He loved so well.

And that love drew people to him, and it made people question the status quo and both of those things were dangerous. He could have stopped. He didn't have to go to Jerusalem. He could have stepped back, stepped down. But he didn't, he continued on his way, and it cost him his life.

Jesus is not alone in that radical act of continuing his life's work, his call up to his death, probably fully knowing the costs. Martin Luther King provides us with another window on this sort of crazy, radical love, the giving of self fully knowing the costs.

The day before Dr. King was shot, he shared some of these words, *'Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord'*. Those were the last public words of Dr. King. He was killed hours later.

Like Jesus, he died in the name of love. In the name of Love. . . those are words from the chorus of the rock band U2's song *Pride*. Bono, the lead singer for U2, wrote that song to lift up those throughout history who have died because they preached of the equality of all people and practiced nonviolence as the only way to achieve their goal.

The song is about these people, MLK, Christ, who lived their life with pride, not in a boastful way, but with the pride a person has when their thoughts and actions are motivated by their understanding and full awareness of the dignity and sanctity of all human life. In the name of love.

Bono wrote the song as a reminder of this ideal, in the name of love. He wrote it to remind us of how these people lived their life and died with love, and that this love is really an expression of God's love for all of humanity. In the name of love, they died because they were trying to spread this message of God's love for all creation. In the name of love.

And so, we return to the cross. When I look at the cross, I see God. Not the God that requires death to bridge a gap or to forgive sins. I see God that is in all people who see the suffering that is, and the suffering to come, and who choose compassion, and justice, and love, and the hope of a better world, and are willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen. Whatever it takes to make that happen, in the name of love.

A pope over a hundred years ago created the festival we celebrate today, Christ the King Sunday, to celebrate 'the return of Christ'. As we walk into this advent season where we will anticipate and celebrate Emmanuel, God among us, may we allow Christ to return to us, to our hearts, calling us forward to live in the name of love.

In the name of love...Amen