

Sermon Monika

23rd November 2025 Christ the King

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 23.1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this

is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

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.’ Jesus replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

*Loving God, we gather in Your name, and we invite Your Divine Presence into this **space**. Bless our time of worship and learning.*

In Your holy name, we pray. Amen.

The gospel starts with the words ‘When they came to the **place** that is called The Skull’. The name of the place says a lot, doesn’t it?!

And in my introductory prayer, I said ‘Loving God, we gather in Your name, and we invite Your Divine Presence into this **space**’, which of course refers to **both our gathered communal space but also each of our inner (heart)spaces.**

This invites me to focus on the concept/reality of place or space, on **outer (geographical) place/space** such as ‘The Skull’, but also **inner place/space we call** the heart space.

Outer geographical place/space and within it the **actions of those present at the place called The Skull** – so the

behaviours of the people, the leaders, the soldiers and one of the criminals, and their words and attitudes.

‘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...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!'...One of the criminals who were hanged there kept **deriding** him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

Inner places/spaces

It is easy to look at the verbs used, such as 'stood by', 'watched', 'scoffed', 'mocked', 'derided', and deduce the **inner (heart)spaces** of the people, the leaders, the soldiers and one of the criminals from which those

behaviours, words and attitudes originated... one could describe these inner (heart)spaces as utterly evil, utterly corrupt, utterly rotten: utterly godless.

Inner places/spaces of Jesus and of the other criminal

Amid all the scoffing and mocking and derision, Jesus said, '**Father, forgive them**; for they do not know what they are doing.'

And the other criminal said to his fellow criminal, '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.**' Jesus replied, '**Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.**' It can also be translated as 'today you are with me in Paradise' (in the place called The Skull).

Let's look first at Jesus and his inner (*heart*)place/space.

Amid all the horror that is done to him, he does three things:

1. He keeps his inner (loved and loving) space open; he has access to his inner heart space. It is not collapsed and corrupted by all the horrific violence and cruelty committed on and around him.

2. In that inner heart space, he connects with God – **vertical connectedness** – he says, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'
3. And from his inner space he also connects with one of the criminals – **horizontal connectedness** - he says: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

In one of my previous sermons, I quoted the Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast... I'm going to repeat his words again from his beautiful book *A Listening Heart*: 'The heart stands for that centre of our being at which we are truly 'together'. Together with

ourselves...together with all other creatures, for the heart is that realm [that *space*] where I am paradoxically not only most intimately myself, but most intimately united with all. Together with God, the source of my life.'

Amid all the unutterable violence and horror, Jesus is (1.) 'most intimately himself', (2.) 'together with God, the source of [his] life, and (3.) 'most intimately united with all [he says, 'Father forgive them'; and also particularly connected to the criminal who **recognises** him].

Now let's look at the criminal.

From what the criminal says to his fellow criminal, it implies that he **recognises** Jesus, in the sense that he

knows who he is. He can see that 'this man has done nothing wrong' - he recognises his purity, his godliness, his origin, if you like – it is a **heart-to-heart recognition, connection and encounter.**

Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz in 1943, left the journal that she had kept over two years before her deportation and death, which is now published under the title ***An Interrupted Life***:

'You cannot help us...we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we **safeguard that little piece [place/space] of You, God in ourselves.** There must be

someone to live through it all and **bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times.**'

Rowan Williams comments on this passage from Ety:

'God's nature and action in the world entail that God is not an item in the world, battling for advantage. The religious life, on this account, would be taking on the task of **ensuring a habitation [place/space] for God, a God who does not guarantee for himself a place in the created world, a place alongside other agents, and so is visible only when a human life gives place, offers**

hospitality to God, so that this place, this identity becomes a testimony.¹

Jesus and the other criminal offer hospitality to God, so that their **place**, their identity becomes a testimony.

Today we celebrate 'Christ the King'. Our OT reading says, 'The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as **king**. Our gospel quotes the soldiers saying to Jesus, 'If you are the **King** of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the **King** of the Jews.'

¹ Rowan Williams 'Faith in the Public Square'

The etymology of the word **king** is very revealing and helpful here: the word comes from Old English *cyning* = **son of the kin** (kin = one's family and relations); it **signifies a leader who embodies the identity of his people, a leader who represents the people's shared identity, rather than a position of power imposed from outside. WOW!**

Jesus is that kind of leader, that kind of kin(g), he embodies the deepest and truest identity of his people, he does not impose a position of power from outside; on the contrary, he hangs powerlessly on the cross, yet he is all-powerful – what a paradox!

Jeremiah talks of 'raising up for David a righteous **Branch**', another revealing word: Latin *branca* = **paw, footprint.**

Jesus doesn't leave us lofty ideas and pious thoughts to believe in, Jesus leaves us the paw(hand) - and footprint for the kind of journey he invites us into: touching and embracing everybody and walking from his inner space where he is together with his deepest Self, together with God and together with all other creatures.

To sum up, Jesus dies on the cross, and Jesus asks us to, 'Take up [our] cross and follow [him]!' (Matthew 16:24-26). **I wonder what your cross is.**

And somewhere else in the gospels he says, 'by their fruit you will recognise them' (Matthew 7:16); just like we recognise one criminal by his bad, destructive fruit, and we recognise the other criminal by his good, life-giving fruit.

As a paediatric chaplain, I work with people in hospital who carry so many kinds of crosses.

- A woman who leaves a prayer on our prayer tree in the chapel after her 24th miscarriage...

- Parents who give birth to a stillborn...
- Parents whose only child is diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour...
- Parents whose child has been on dialysis for the last seven years, finally receives a kidney transplant, and then their new kidney fails...
- A child who witnesses a lorry driving into their car and loses their mum...

My list of crosses we witness as chaplains can go on and on and on...

And every day I witness different kinds of fruit. Many wonderful, beautiful fruits: beautiful, loving, kind,

enduring, sacrificial parents and families, but sadly also bad fruits: fathers who abandon their partners and children leaving mothers to raise their children by themselves, parents and adults who abuse their children in the most unimaginable ways...

Jesus says, 'Take up your cross and follow me!' What is your cross? Jesus invites us into the great paradox of loss and Love. This place where loss and Love, or to use the words from our gospel, Skull and Paradise, co-exist, can only be found within. And Jesus, God, the Divine lives within us in that unitive place or space called the heart.

The question is, do we **recognise** God's power and presence inside us just like the one criminal did? Amen. 1483