

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."

(from *With Love to the World*, writer Peter Walker)

Some believers have a vivid feeling of Jesus being personally near to them. Others of no less faith find this feeling elusive. Are there particular places or ways in which you experience the presence of Jesus? Last week we read that the kingdom of God is near to us. Now a criminal asks Jesus on the cross to be remembered when he comes 'into his kingdom'. What might it say about the nearness of the resurrected Jesus if he is now *in* his kingdom? That is, if it is a distant celestial throne, not one that is near. If his kingdom is near, among, and within his people, then the risen Christ is very close to us. Luke's is the only crucifixion scene to include this exchange. It is intended to reassure those stunned by those events. Luke's scene also includes the word 'save' which is used several times in mockery of Jesus: first by leaders, and then by soldiers. Jesus does not save himself, as the taunters had invited. Rather, the scene closes with Jesus saving a dying criminal. Imagine the scene on 'the Skull' (Golgotha). Around him were bodies beaten and exhausted of breath, nailed and placed on display. A bloodied and shamed criminal is moved to ask that at least in death he might be remembered. We remember that request, as surely as Jesus within his kingdom remembers.

COCU67C Reign of Christ

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."

(from *With Love to the World*, writer Peter Walker)

This passage opens with a blistering attack on the shepherds (rulers) for not properly caring for the flock, and so causing them to scatter. The shepherds have in fact driven the sheep away, which is much more than a sin of omission. That corrupt leaders are the root cause of distress is a recurring theme in Jeremiah. Today, the media regularly feature examples of the same problem in both church and public office. Power held over others (as distinct from power held for the sake of others) holds a peculiar seduction for some and is a malignancy that Jeremiah will not leave un-named. Here we are listening to experiences in the first half of the 7th century BCE. The leaders have misled the people and brought them to destruction. Jeremiah is sometimes called the prophet of doom - but that depends on who you are. He is wary of the shepherds, yet heartily concerned for the sheep! Through Jeremiah God promises to establish a righteous leader that will restore the people. That king will be wise and righteous, bringing safety and salvation to Israel and Judah. The return of all who have been scattered will follow.

Luke 1:68-79

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

(from *With Love to the World*, writer Peter Walker)

Naming Christ as King is a public act, which we do and celebrate on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. At the time Luke was writing, this was a risky public act, which had the potential to place the confessor in strife with religious and/or imperial leaders. If Christ is your King, then someone else who expects to be isn't. Standing for the kingdom of Jesus, for the love of God and neighbour above all else, may threaten those who make gods of other things. Faith has become a privatised affair in the West since the rise of nation states in the 16th century. Many speak of the modern domestication of faith. Keeping faith 'in its place' suits the prevailing political and economic winds. But is the place of faith private or public - in all, or only in part of life? Fred Craddock, speaking about Zechariah's prophecy at the time of John the Baptist's birth, suggests this may have been an early hymn used by John's followers. Verse 78 in the TEV says, 'he will cause the dawn of salvation to rise on us'. God raised a redeemer whom we may serve without fear, all of our days. He is truly a king to sing about, and not just in private.

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

(from *With Love to the World*, writer Peter Walker)

Colossae, in modern day Turkey, was a culturally diverse city when this letter was written. A nearby trade route from Ephesus to the river Euphrates ensured a steady flow of merchants and military. Thus it was a setting where religions and traders met and mingled. It was a market place of spiritual teachings, a cosmopolitan town in which the early Christians 'had options' - something to which it is easy for us to relate today. New forms of media like Facebook, but also older ones like TV, are also market places and 'virtual' trade routes. Through the various forms of the media, people and fashions compete for our (financial) devotion under the guise of being a friend, or an aide to life. They promise home, body, spiritual, retail and technological renovation. Paul wrote to the Colossians to address questions abounding in their setting - and ours. Who or what truly deserves our devotion? All the rulers and powers were created through Christ and for him. Christ alone, however, is the Lord of the entire cosmos. All that we see and all we cannot see are one in him, the image of the invisible God. What lessons might be learned from today's extensive interest in social media networks, spiritual guides and life-change programs?