

Luke 23:33-43

Reign of Christ / Transgender Day of Remembrance

November 20, 2022

When reading the Gospels, and especially accounts of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, it is important to remember that we are not reading a modern work of history, with its emphasis on historical factual accuracy and objectivity. We are instead reading an account that has a particular point to make: one that takes a particular point of view. In this case, Luke wants to show us how the Holy Spirit was at work in Jesus to proclaim the kingdom of God. It was written at a time when Christians had separated from their Jewish roots and were in conflict with the Pharisees. So anything it says about Pilate or Herod or the Pharisees or the Jews should not be taken as literal historical truth, nor should it be generalized to Jews today.

That being said, Luke makes a point of demonstrating that Jesus is innocent of the claims against him. His accusers describe him as preaching insurrection against Rome, and, ironically, insist on his punishment and the freedom of Barabbas, who is actually guilty of both insurrection and murder. Both Pilate, the Roman governor in the area of Jerusalem, and Herod, the Roman puppet king in Galilee, are curious about him and a little bit at a loss as to what to do with him. They find him innocent of these accusations. But after enough fuss is made, Pilate consents to his crucifixion. Because the bottom line

is that the Roman government serves first Rome, second the local elites, and last of all the common people. Order, not justice, is the government's concern, and so he is nailed to the cross with the words, "The King of the Jews" over his head. In other words, this is a political execution of someone considered to be a potential rival king to Herod and to Caesar. On either side of this innocent man are two others, described as criminals.

As he dies, in the Gospels According to Matthew and Mark, the onlooking Roman centurion remarks, "Truly this man was the Son of God," but in Luke, he says, "Certainly this man was innocent!"

The body of the innocent man upon the cross recalls the bodies of many other innocent men and women. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God in the face of the kingdom of Caesar, living into his identity as the Messiah, the Son of God, the saviour. For this he was murdered. Similarly, 375 innocent transgender people were murdered in 2021, innocent of any crime, guilty simply of declaring who and what they were called to be.

Why?

Because the same kind of entrenched power and violent ideology that murdered Jesus persists through human history. Reign of Christ Sunday was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in opposition to the rise of authoritarian systems like Communism and Fascism. Once again in this decade we are witnessing the resurgence of nationalist

ideologies that worship power and idolize strong, dictatorial leadership. These kinds of ideologies like to keep everything and everyone in their place. They express a hypermasculinity and a homophobia that hates anything different, anyone like Jesus—or a transgender or queer person—who lives and loves across boundaries.

Christianity has, unfortunately, often been co-opted by autocrats for their own purposes. In the Northern hemisphere this often means White nationalism, and so of course it means a white—usually Aryan—Jesus. But Jesus as a king who hangs on a cross, and who above all does not condemn his murderers but forgives them, is a difficult figurehead for a movement that thrives on power and fear. Jesus is not among the powerful, but among the powerless.

What if, in addition to depicting Jesus Christ as a white male—often among the most powerful in society—we also imagined the Christ - the Messiah - as a Black or Asian transgender woman, who along with the scars of her crucifixion also bears the scars of their gender affirmation surgery?

Might we find that, once we imagine a transgender body as invested with divine worth and dignity, we can more easily see the divine worth and dignity of all other transgender people?

And might we find that this Christ is, despite our fear of the Other, even more approachable? What was it in Jesus that made one of the other crucified men turn to him

and say, "Remember me, when you come into your kingdom"? Why did this man, who was defined by the powers that be as a criminal, an outcast, a danger, beyond any human care or mercy, see in Jesus someone who could have mercy upon him and even save him? Possibly simply the fact that this Jesus was not on a throne adorned in purple garments, but on his level, dying beside him.

If the Christ can be a transgender person, if he or she or they, one of the most vulnerable and sinned against segments of our population, can be the saviour chosen by God, then surely they can understand us when we, feeling unloved and unworthy, approach them for mercy and recognition.

The Christ responds, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

This word, which originally referred to the Persian king's hunting grounds,¹ was adopted for the eternal, heavenly Garden of Eden: in other words, the fully realized kingdom of God in which we will return to the state of that first mythical garden: a state in which we find perfect union with God and there is no death, no hunger, no violence.

This is the kingdom that mocks the concept of kingdoms; this is the king who shows kings to be servants; this is the kingdom inaugurated by a rejected servant king who rules from a cross. This is the kingdom in which we all belong.

¹ Vernon K. Robbins, "Luke 23:33-43: Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 337.