

Pontifex – The Bridge- Builder

Psalm 46
Luke 23:33-43

Colossians 1:11-23

November 21, 2010

Christ the King Sunday

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

Christ the King is the last Sunday in the Christian Calendar Year. It was added to The Church Calendar a few years ago so that we are sure to go out with a bang, not a whimper. It was meant to emphasize that no matter what happens – wars, fires, floods, tsunamis, recessions, loss of a job, loss of a marriage, death of a family member, no matter what, Jesus Christ is still King, and his Kingdom will be preserved, and so will you, in him.

The take-home message is summed up in those verses from Colossians. “God 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... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things... by making peace through the blood of his cross.”ⁱ

I have been deeply touched lately through hearing amazing stories of faith from many of you, new officers in training who have described dark chapters in your lives and how God has led you through, others who are struggling with drug addiction, alcoholism, some who are in a relational struggle in a marriage or a dark night of the soul when faith seems gone, when loneliness grips, when God seems far away. Yet you told me - he is still right here with you. He is still leading you through. Some of you have affirmed that. Some of you are still looking, listening for him. God’s Word in Holy Scripture tells us he is still here and at work, as the Psalmist affirms in the midst of upheaval. “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A number of you recently commented on how you were helped by a few lines I put into a Highlights Newsletter. Not lines of my creation but my copying, beautiful poignant lines by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. which he spoke in his “Eulogy for the Martyred Children” at their funeral after they were murdered by the bombing at 16th Street Baptist Church here in Birmingham. Remember?

“At times, life is hard, as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and painful moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of a river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of the summers and the piercing chill of its winters. But through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The center point of that peace, presence and power, of that victory and vitality, is the cross, where Jesus was ironically crowned as King. His critics and executioners mockingly shouted to him, “King of the Jews,” as he hung there, victim of heinous injustice. Yet God made him truly that, King of the Jews and King of All. “Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne, the Potentate of time, who rose victorious to the strife for those he came to save.” The means is suffering. The end is victory, Jesus ruling from the throne of Kingly power in heaven. The way to that victory is the agony and shame, and yet the glory of the Cross. “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time.”

Here in the Gospel reading from Luke we come to the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, the passion event itself, the mystery of Jesus’ sacrifice for us showing us the depth of God’s love. Here Luke portrays uniquely in the midst of Jesus’ compassion for a common criminal whom he blesses from the extremity of his own cross, amid their mutual suffering, and promises this repentant thief, who fears God and looks to Jesus he will indeed be remembered. This repentant thief will be the first beneficiary of Jesus’ passion then taking place, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”^{iv}

He is the Bridge-builder. In his death on the cross and his victory over death through the resurrection, Jesus is the bridge-builder. “You will be with me.” Pontifex is the Latin word for Bridge-builder. It is a term that was applied historically to the high priest of pagan ancient Rome. Later the Roman Catholic Church applied the term to a Christian Bishop. The chief builder, the Pontifex Maximus was attributed to the pope. But, even the Roman church views Jesus the Christ as the Pontifex Maximus. Jesus goes all the way down to the worst possible suffering at that place of death called “The Skull”, because of the stark skull-like image of the surrounding rock at Golgotha. There at that awful place, outside the city wall, the Jerusalem garbage dump where refuse burned and human excrement was piled. There, they brought the Son of Man and put him to an unjust, shameful, humiliating death. There this Bridge-builder by his death finished his work, completed the bridge between heaven and earth, between God and us, between us and others. There he accomplished eternal reconciliation.

When our boys were little and still in their baby beds we read them Bible Stories at night using those old Bible Picture Books that you sometimes find in the waiting rooms of pediatricians’ and dentists’ offices, books I actually grew up with myself. They contained brightly painted pictures of famous Bible stories and accompanying narrative.

Both Stuart and Peter were especially captivated with the picture of Jesus being crucified on the Cross, dying between two thieves and the accompanying story of its meaning. It was the biggest picture in all the books, the only one covering two full open pages. I can remember Stuart saying, as we were putting out the light after the story, “Want Jesus on Cross.” We would reach for that book, open it to that picture of the crucifixion, one of the most profound of mysteries, the Cross, and he would stare at it, until falling asleep with that picture open beside him in his little bed.

The meaning of this death is not to be found in the horrors of which people are capable, the treason of his friend Judas, the abandonment of the Twelve, the denial of Peter, the injustice of the High Court, the failure of the his own religious institution, the cowardice of the politicians. Evil runs amuck through these events. Evil seems to have won. Yet no. This is not the end. This is not the meaning.

The meaning is this: that through this shameful heinous act God, triumphs as he reveals the height and depth and length and breadth of his love, and accomplishes his work of salvation. As Isaiah had anticipated 500 years earlier, writing to those returned from exile, “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”^v As Paul would reflect on this event 20 or so years later, writing in Colossians to the Churches of Asia Minor, “you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless before him.”^{vi}

During the four years Stuart was a university student at the College of Charleston, we watched, as we made periodic family visits there, as a massive new suspension bridge was going up across the Bay of Charleston to connect old town Charleston with Mt. Pleasant, SC. The two areas are separated by that famous vast deep Bay of Charleston where the first shots of the Civil War were fired upon Ft. Sumpter. This emerging suspension bridge was a marvel of engineering to behold as it went up stretching from each side of the bay simultaneously. It is the longest cable-stayed suspension bridge in the Western Hemisphere with a main span of 1,546 feet. The bridge arched up extremely high to allow tall oceangoing ships to pass through below. In its building, the arch from each side seemed to go up to empty air. Each visit, 3 or 6 months apart, we would see the sides growing closer and closer until, when we arrived that last visit for Stuart’s college graduation, the two sides had been joined almost it seemed miraculously and we drove across that immense bridge for the first time, hardly giving it a second thought – yet marvelously linked and provided for – across the vast body of water.

The death of Jesus on the Cross is a bridge like that. Through his death God built for us all, for the whole world, a new bridge between a holy God and a sinful people. Because God was willing to allow his own Son, part of his divine being to suffer the very worst that is possible we have received the greatest victory possible. “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”^{vii}

This victory tells us not only that salvation, deliverance into heaven when we die, awaits us “provided we continue secure established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting,”^{viii} as Paul puts it, but also this victory gives us the strength to endure here and now, everything! When we feel overwhelmed, utterly wiped out, spent and powerless, God comes to us, assuring us he is still here, he is still present, he is still alive through his Spirit, and he is still able to carry us on and to carry us over.

This is what the Psalmist bears witness to in that majestic 46th Psalm that was the basis of Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." "Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam... (yet, yet) God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."^{ix} A mighty fortress is our God!

Once a father took his young son on a hike up high into the mountains. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a terrible snowstorm swept in and engulfed them. Sensing eminent danger, the father spotted nearby a little low spot in the ground, a hole, just large enough to place his son into. He guided him down there and then laid himself over the hole, covering his son with his own body. When rescuers came and found them the next day, they discovered the little boy safe and alive, unhurt, beneath the frozen dead body of his father. He had taken the cold spot for him. He had sacrificed his own life for his child.

Sometimes life is hard, as hard as crucible steel, and lonely and dark. The waves rise high, the storms rage. But we have a friend over troubled waters - the Bridge-builder. Frederick Buechner describes our lives and this One, who connects us to himself and each other like this,

"Deep in you there is a self that longs above all to be known and accepted, but there is also such a self in me, in everyone else the world over. So when we meet as strangers, when even friends look like strangers, it is good to remember that we need each other greatly you and I, more than much of the time we dare to imagine, more than most of the time we dare to admit.

Island calls to island across the silence, and once, in trust, the real words come, a bridge is built and love is done – not sentimental, emotional love, but love that is *pontifex*, bridge-builder. Love that speaks the holy and healing word which is: *God be with you, stranger who are no stranger. I wish you well.* The islands become an archipelago, a continent, becomes a kingdom whose name is the Kingdom of God.^x

My friends, God our greatest friend has built a bridge across, a bridge over troubled waters, a bridge between heaven earth, between you and God, between you and another. Go across that bridge, live along that bridge, like those bridges as in Venice with houses and shops along it, where strangers now are friends, and God's power is made known in weakness, and Jesus Christ's victory is made known in strength. And you will make it through; you will endure.

"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 light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us in to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Thank God we have a King worthy of all praise, worthy of all worship, worthy of all life. “Love so amazing, so divine, demands our soul, our life, our all.” Alleluia! To our King Jesus! Alleluia! Amen!

ⁱ Colossians 1:13-14, 19-20

ⁱⁱ Psalm 46

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., I Have A Dream, Writings and Speeches, “Eulogy for the Martyred Children”, p. 117

^{iv} Luke 23:43

^v Is. 53:5

^{vi} Colossians 1:21

^{vii} 1 Cor. 15:57

^{viii} Colossians 1:23

^{ix} Verses from Psalm 46

^x Frederick Buechner, The Hungering Dark, p.47