

In my office, I have a cross. This is no real surprise, I'm sure. But this particular cross is special to me. It was given to me when I was a student, by someone who brought it back from a mission trip to Honduras. It's kind of an unassuming thing. It's made of wrought iron (I think); it's black, with no ornamentation. It stands upright, on my desk where I keep a candle and Bible and prayer journal. Whoever made it, made a peculiar choice: the cross sits at about a 45 degree angle on the square base. I suppose there could be some practical reason for this, or maybe just an aesthetic one, but I've recently begun to think that maybe there's something deeper to that choice.

The design means that I either have to align the base with the lines of the space--the edge of the shelf, or the wall. Or, I can have the cross facing straight on, but then the base is out of line. If I want the lines to match up, I can only look at the cross askance, at an angle. If I look at the cross straight on, the base has to shift.

I'm not sure that this is terribly profound, but it's often led me to reflect on the way that I come to the cross. The more I try to line up the cross with the other "lines" in my life, the more I can only look at it from an angle, sometimes just out of the corner of my eye; I can't see it straight on. Probably the truth is that I don't always want to look at the cross straight on. I don't *want* to see it clearly, but only from a somewhat pleasant angle.

But in those moments when I do face the cross, as it is, the clearer it becomes that it's at odds with the lines, the structures and motives of this world, the desires and biases of my heart and my life. There is no way to look at the cross and not have our bases shift.

I suspect that's why we're confronted with the crucifixion on this Christ the King Sunday. In itself it feels a touch disorienting to be faced with this story, this scene,

here at the end of November, on the last Sunday of the Christian year. Next week we turn the calendar over; next week we start waiting again. But here, as we celebrate the culmination of another year of the church seeking to follow Jesus-- and not just heeding good advice from an ancient sage, but submitting to Jesus as Lord, King of our hearts, our minds, our lives, and (we dare to sing) the universe-- here in this moment, we're not permitted to look at the cross out of the corner of our eyes. "Look," Luke says: Here is your king. Not floating majestically somewhere between heaven and earth, but nailed to a stake in the ground, hanging between criminals. Here is your king, you faithful. If that doesn't set our bases off line, I'm not sure what will.

I was reminded this week that the feast of Christ the King is quite new, in the grand scheme of things. Pope Pious XI instituted it in 1925, as a response to what he saw as increasing individualism, secularism, and the creeping appeal of fascism. This sounds vaguely familiar. Pious wanted to remind Christians that ours is an unavoidably different way in the world, that we have a radically different kind of King whose rule shapes our lives. If last week Jesus reminded us that in the midst of a broken and fractious world we have something to say, a testimony that will not be withstood or overcome, this week, in the shadow of the cross, we can't avoid how different, how other this testimony is to the blustering ways of the world. The king enthroned on a cross is a hard thing to make fit with our familiar lines. No wonder it's foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others.

I mean, who is this king, who prays forgiveness over us--over his enemies and detractors and betrayers? Read the second Psalm: the promise of God to the anointed One, the beloved Son, is that all he has to do is ask and the kingdoms of the world will be given to him, to be broken with an iron rod. This is the prerogative of the king, to crush his enemies, to destroy what stands in his way or

challenges his greatness. And yet, here is this king using the last of his energy to console a dying criminal; praying not, "Father, give me the nations for target practice," but, "Father, forgive them--they don't know what they're doing."

And can there really be any doubt that that prayer is also for us?--even if, when we hear Jesus pray, "Forgive them--they don't know what they're doing," it's hard to line that up with what we've been told: that we know, or at least we can know what we're doing, if we try hard enough, and stick to our convictions, and watch our diet. I never cease to be amazed how often we're told, in any number of ways, that we are the first and final authority on the way things are for us. The ever-expanding self-help industry suggests that we're quite happy to believe that. Even as a Christian, I know I've been guilty of more or less asking God to bless *my* best decisions, as though what I really need is a bit of divine pixie dust to get things right, not an overhaul of my heart and mind, not radical obedience. "Father, forgive them--they don't know what they're doing."

And who is this king who refuses to save himself? What kind of a saviour won't, or can't save *himself*? If ever we needed evidence that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, that its end is beyond our imaginations, this would seem to be it. "Save yourself! If you really are who you say you are, climb down and prove it." There isn't a voice in the crowd--even the most faithful, it seems--that can honestly imagine that this battered mess hanging between criminals can emerge victorious from this situation. Some of us don't even bother paying much attention anymore. There are still clothes to be divided after all, something to be gained out of this tragic and rather embarrassing end to Jesus' revolution.

Here is your king, you faithful.

Of course, we see this moment in the gospel from the other side of it. We know that this isn't the end. We know that Jesus' words aren't empty promises to the criminal who--beyond expectation or reason--trusts him. We know that there will be resurrection. Beyond our own reason or expectation, we have come to claim that this really is an inauguration ceremony; that with Jesus' dying breath the foundation of God's kingdom of hope and peace and joy and love is firmly, irreversibly established.

Karl Barth calls this the first church service, with Jesus standing in the midst of a repentant and an unrepentant sinner. We know what couldn't possibly be: that from this catastrophic church service will burst the church of Acts--a revolution that will indeed turn the world upside down, or right-side up. And that the church will eventually fulfill Jesus' mandate to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, so that today there's hardly a corner of the world in which the name of Jesus isn't prayed and preached. From a church service with two sinners (only one of whom repents) and Jesus battered and breathing his last, we now have mega-churches!

But perhaps that's all the more reason to be grateful, that on this Sunday when we proclaim Christ's kingship, we also have a clear-eyed reminder of just what kind of king we follow, what kind of kingdom we're called, as the church, to pledge our allegiance to. If we are to be, in Eugene Peterson's words, "a colony of heaven in the kingdom of death," if we'll be ambassadors of heaven's kingdom, if we'll be heralds of a world renewed and restored, if we will embody the hope and peace and joy and love that we anticipate when the kingdom of our crucified king is fulfilled, we'd better be able to look at him and see just what kind of king this is and the shape of his kingdom. If we'll be faithful, we cannot shy away from the truth that we are called to be faithful to the One who insists that the kingdom of

God is cross-shaped, that it's wrought only in self-giving love, even for those who least deserve it.

St. Paul makes this wild claim in his letter to the Colossians that the cross makes the ways of the world look ridiculous, even comically so. It is the undoing of the powers of idolatry, of destructive and self-absorbed individualism, of the kind of ruling that seeks its own power at the expense of others. The cross is the reminder that though the kingdoms of the world plot and scheme against God's kingdom of justice, love and righteousness, those schemes will fall desperately short. The cross is foolishness to a world that is crumbling; but if we have eyes to see, if we'll allow our bases to be shifted out of line with the ways of the world, it's the hope of a world being made new--it is the power of God's ferocious, relentless love; the power of God to redeem and restore this broken and beloved world.

And I'm convinced that if we dare to look at it straight on, that not only can we pray the criminal's prayer with confidence and hope (because its hope is surely ours, too), "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"; not only can we rest assured that he does indeed remember us, that there's nothing in heaven, earth or hell that will keep him from us, not even death; but if we dare to look at the cross, at our King, that more and more there will be nothing that keeps *us* from *him*. The more we dare to look, to listen, to trust, the more we dare to pray that His kingdom would come on earth, in our lives as in heaven, the more we will find ourselves living it--living the hope and peace and joy and love of God for the sake of this world--here and now and come what may.

And so, (in the end I'm not sure I can do better than paraphrase Paul) may our hearts and minds and lives be shaped in the will and way of the One who beyond all wonder didn't regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but

emptied himself, taking on our broken form, and being obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross.

*Therefore* God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, here and now and forever.

Amen.