

24.11.2019  
By Pat Bennett

## Introduction

Today, with the Feast of Christ the King, we greet the last Gospel reading for Year C of the lectionary – and in so doing reach the end of the first three year cycle of reflections from the Spirituality of Conflict project. By chance, I was also the author of the very first reflection – on Matthew 24 for Advent 1 in 2016 – which reflected on the narrowing of the emotional key and changing narrative dynamic which occurs across the five great discourses in Matthew’s gospel, relating these to unfolding background events. In a way this set the scene for one of the threads which has emerged over the last three years as we have considered the Gospel texts through the lens of a ‘spirituality of conflict’ *viz.* how the spaces we inhabit affect the degrees of freedom within which we can operate and thus our capacity for creative response. Today’s passage confronts us with examples of this –in both its worst and its staggeringly best form – and so, in an unexpected and powerful way, the cycle of readings comes full circle and completes itself.

## Preparation

On a sheet of blank paper write your own definition of the word ‘King’ and list some of the characteristics of kingship that go with that description.

On a separate sheet, write a definition of what you understand by ‘the Kingdom of God’ and again list some of the key features which belong with this understanding.

Now compare your two sheets: are they in harmony with each other or are there discrepancies and dissonances between them – and if so what are they?

Spend some time using whatever comes out of this exercise to reflect on what you might want to celebrate about the kingship of Christ.

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## Text

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.”

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## Comment

One of the recurrent themes on which we have reflected in various different ways across this turn through the lectionary cycle, has been the way in which different narratives – be they theological or political, ones of tribal identity, rooted in ‘rational’ reflection or instinctive emotional responses etc.– can exert a profound (though often unrecognised) influence on how we read a situation, and thus how we respond and act. All too frequently the effect of these narratives can be a constraining one – restricting our capacity for more expansive understanding and thus the potential for transformative responses.

In today’s Gospel reading, in an economical but nevertheless vivid way, Luke shows us the responses of a number of different groups to the conundrum of Jesus: to the leaders of various religious groups in Jerusalem he is a threat to the religious *status quo* – subjected to a derisive belittling attack as a way of defusing this; to the secular authorities he is an enemy of the state – depersonalised and reduced through a crude epigram to a mere cipher; to the soldiers overseeing the execution, he is an object of sport and derision – the butt of cruel and sadistic torments; to

one of those being executed with him, he is someone representing a last desperate throw of the dice against death – reproached and reviled for failing to deliver. All of these responses are rooted in particular narratives and, in each case, there is a sense of sclerosis about these – a hardness and rigidity which is incapable of allowing any expansion or change. The cumulative effect of all these overlaid is almost suffocating, closing down any possibility of movement.

And yet, in the midst of this seeming paralysis something remarkable occurs as, at its centre, we see a completely opposite dynamic unfold. Jesus acts out of *his* narrative centre to do what he has done lifelong (and, incidentally, has also allowed to be done for himself by others e.g. Lk 7:36ff): in response to someone reaching out, beyond the confines and constraints of the narratives self-chosen or forced on them by others, he makes a space in which the Other can be seen and can see themselves; in which voices can be heard, and narratives explored and changed. In this instance, that space is opened and affirmed in two beautiful ways: ‘*Amen*’ says Jesus as another dying man reaches out for a last experience of relational connection. We are used to saying ‘amen’ at the end of things as an assent but it was also used as a prelude to give a strong emphasis to what was to follow. And what follows is *semeron* – today – a word which Luke uses at key points in his Gospel to announce a moment when the world decisively changes (Lk 2:11; 4:21; 19:9). Here, while the moment is intensely purposeful and active in its generation, it exists as a suspended, timeless space for the two agents involved, one in which each is held in the gaze of the other. German language poet Hilde Domin describes such a moment in her poem ‘Alle meine Schiffe’\*

‘Nur der kleine  
zärtliche Abstand  
zwischen dir und mir,  
den du nicht verminderst’

rendered in poet Mark Burrows’ lucid and beautiful translation as

‘A small  
tender gap  
between you and me,  
which you don’t diminish.’

‘All my Ships’ – Hilde Domin *Trans. by Mark S. Burrows*  
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We generally read this moment through a salvific lens as a divine/human interaction in which Jesus in his divinity bestows forgiveness on a human who recognises his true, kingly, identity. This revelation of identity is of course a major part of Luke’s narrative arc but – as we have seen and discussed so often over the last 3 years – one of the profound beauties of the Gospel texts is that, in their dense layering and rich patterning, they utterly resist single readings. Thus to see this episode just through this one lens is to belie something profound in it; something which has huge implications for us, not just in our approach to conflict, but more fundamentally for how we attempt to realise, inhabit, and express the life of the Kingdom in our everyday connections with others, in a way which follows the example of its King. At the end of the day this is primarily a moment between two people – two embodied people – in extremis. It is hard to imagine the noise – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual – which Jesus is experiencing in these last hours of his life, and yet tenderly and with infinite loving generosity, he makes and holds a space in which another person, another story, can be...and can be transformed.

May we learn how to do likewise – for this is where the Kingdom of God, that of

which Christ is the king, begins.

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## Response

Choose a number of people with whom you are differently connected – for example someone close, someone more distant, someone with whom you are involved in a situation of conflict. Spend some time reflecting prayerfully on the spaces in which those connections are held and operate.

What things do you want to celebrate and affirm?

Are there things which need attention? If so, what steps can you take towards this?

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## Prayer

Jesus –  
the infinite space who contains all potential –

may we learn how  
to make and hold,  
offer and share,  
the small tender spaces  
of hospitable acceptance  
generous welcome  
and rich possibility  
which are the hallmark  
of your Kingdom

Amen