

Christ the King and the Penitent Criminal in Luke

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

November 21, 2010

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

A friend shared with me this story about his seven-year old son Mark, who decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes for breakfast. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor. He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar and an egg, leaving a floury trail on the floor, which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten. Mark was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very special for Mom and Dad, but it was turning out very badly. He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove (and he didn't know how the stove worked!). Suddenly he saw his kitten licking the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor. Frantically he tried to clean up this monumental disaster, but slipped on the eggs and landed on the floor, getting his pajamas white and sticky. Just then he saw Dad standing at the door. Big tears welled up in Mark's eyes. All he had wanted to do was something good, but he'd made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming, maybe even a spanking. But his father just watched him. Walking through the mess, he picked up his crying son, and hugged him, getting his own pajamas white and sticky in the process of comforting and loving him.

In our Gospel passage, we are presented with an image of Jesus turning upside down the traditional understanding of kingship. Jesus is a king with no earthly power, a king who is servant to the lowest person in his realm...a king who gives himself as a gift to those under his authority rather than collecting tributes and taxes...a king who can be called by his first name and who knows each one he rules over intimately. He is not a king sitting on a throne, but hanging on a cross. His crown is not one of jewels, but of thorns. Despised, rejected, betrayed, denied, and tormented, his subjects are mocking religious leaders, scoffing soldiers, and an insulting crowd. His disciples have abandoned him. The only one who pays him homage is a dying hardened criminal, his last companion and the final person he will help in his earthly life. Jesus' kingdom is not based on accumulated territory built on fear, violence, competition, retaliation, greed, and self-promotion, but constructed on mercy, reconciliation, nonviolence, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness. The power Jesus evokes as king is not power **over** us, but power **for** us. The question posed by our reading as well as this feast day is, who or what will rule over our lives?

Perhaps as Americans, we are uncomfortable with the concept of king because we don't want to surrender the belief that we have absolute sovereignty over our lives...that we are masters of our own destiny..that we have unlimited potentialities..that we can be all that we can be. We are challenged to imitate the penitent criminal who in humility,

came to recognize the limits of his humanity and admit his own personal messes, which led to him being crucified. The nonrepentant criminal along with the rulers, soldiers, and crowd, scornfully call on Jesus to save himself. Ironically, Jesus is being ridiculed for who he really is. For them, in their blindness, Jesus' helplessness is proof he is **not** a king. They taunt Jesus to avoid the cross and escape death...if you are who you say you are, spare yourself and **us** this humiliating scandalous public failure. In fact they use the same exact words that the Devil used to tempt Jesus during his 40 days in the desert. Yet what Luke is trying to tell us is that Jesus did not die to spare us the indignities of our wounded, broken world or to deny death. He died so that we might see those wounds as our own and then yield our self-inflicted fears and failures over to Jesus, so they can be redeemed and we can be set free.

The penitent criminal alone, despite his own pain, stands up for Jesus, proclaiming he has done nothing wrong and is suffering unjustly. The penitent criminal accepts his own punishment as deserved. He offers a confession of faith. He fears God's judgment, but trusts in Jesus and is willing to acknowledge Jesus' power to forgive. He recognizes that Jesus' death is part of a divine plan in which God will vindicate Jesus, leading to his enthronement as king and savior of the world. Thus he correctly perceives who Jesus really is: the King who saves others, even a condemned guilty convict, but not himself.

We are **all** the penitent criminal hanging on crosses we have fashioned for ourselves. By becoming human, Jesus has experienced and known every mortal weakness and fault, including death, and so suffers knowingly right alongside us. The penitent criminal does not ask Jesus to rescue him from the cross or make any bargains with him. All he asks is that Jesus remember him..that in spite of the mess he has made of his life, that Jesus not forget him, a simple plea acknowledging his utter helplessness to save himself. The Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner, commenting on this phrase writes, "When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am, on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind, even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost." And Jesus' surprise answer is not only that this criminal will be with him in paradise, but that this new eternal life begins today! Condemnation has been replaced by restoration and renewal. We enter this joyful, abundant existence, like the penitent criminal, by putting our trust in Jesus and being in relationship with him now. There is never a time when we are not loved or saved, so it is never too late to turn our lives around and rearrange our priorities, as long as there is breath flowing through our bodies. Even in his final, excruciating hours, rather than being absorbed in his own misery, Jesus is still seeking out the lost and ministers to and shows solidarity with a rejected outcast, and in a time of suffering and chaos, he mercifully offers words of calm, reassurance, and encouragement, by bringing pardon and hope.

Like the penitent criminal nailed to desolation, we long for Jesus to remember us. You're late to work again for a job you don't even enjoy, traffic is bumper to bumper with road repair crews slowing it down even further, your mother was just diagnosed with advanced breast cancer, your teenage kids barely speak to you and treat you like a chauffeur, you haven't had passionate relations with your husband in two months, you

desperately want a cup of coffee but there's no time to stop at a Starbuck's... Jesus remember me! Your parents are hardly around as they work overtime and so they have no idea you're thinking about having sex with your new boyfriend, your former best friend with whom you had a fight now writes vicious gossip about you on My Space and Facebook, you received a D+ for English on your report card and you forgot to load new tunes onto your iPhone this morning... Jesus remember me! Your arthritis is bothering you, it gets harder to walk, computers and cell phones terrify you so you hardly hear from your grandchildren, you miss your husband everyday, even though he has been dead for over 10 years, you can hardly remember anyone's name, your children want you to move to an assisted living facility, but you don't want to leave your home of 40 years... Jesus remember me! You've lost your job during this Great Recession, you keep searching on the Internet for a new position, but no one seems to be hiring in your field, your unemployment checks will be coming to an end in another month, and the bills keep piling up, you just split up with your partner because he was cheating on you, your doctor says your cholesterol level is too high and you must lose 30 pounds ... Jesus remember me! Just as he comforted the penitent criminal, the Lord comes to us, no matter what our cross may be, whether it is of our own making or due to unavoidable circumstances beyond our control or no matter how alone and desperate we may feel.

He acts similarly to President Abraham Lincoln who often visited hospitals to talk with wounded soldiers during the Civil War. Once, doctors pointed out a young soldier who was near death and Lincoln went over to his bedside. "Is there anything I can do for you?" asked the President. The soldier obviously didn't recognize Lincoln, and with some effort he was able to whisper, "Would you please write a letter to my mother?" A pen and paper were provided and the President carefully began writing down what the young man was able to say: "My dearest mother, I was badly hurt while doing my duty. I'm afraid I'm not going to recover. Don't grieve too much for me, please. Kiss Mary and John for me. May God bless you and father." The soldier was too weak to continue, so Lincoln signed the letter for him and added, "Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln." The young man asked to see the note and was astonished when he discovered who had written it. "Are you really the President?" he asked. "Yes, I am," Lincoln replied quietly. Then he asked if there was anything else he could do. "Would you please hold my hand?" the soldier asked. "It will help to see me through to the end." In the hushed room, the tall gaunt President took the boy's hand in his and spoke warm words of encouragement until death came. Through Jesus, God knows and has shared the potential hopelessness of the human condition, the hurt, the sadness, the bad mistakes, the crippling losses, disappointments, and frustrations, but takes our messes into himself forgiving us and transforming all this despair into new life and possibilities for us.

And one of the chief ways God comes to be with us in our difficult situations is through the Eucharist, where God's presence becomes a tangible one, where we can feel in our hearts, that love overcomes fear and pain and we learn to view the world through the transformative eyes of God. Through the Eucharist, we can let our king have a say in the daily events of our lives, and not keep him at a distance, but have the close personal intimacy with him, that he desires to have with us. Like the penitent criminal who decided in his final agonizing moments that he wanted the misery and brokenness of his life to have meaning and purpose, we also need a dying Jesus to be with us in our most vulnerable moments with each moment being a death and a rebirth. In awhile, as you

come up to the altar for Eucharist, bring one pain, one anxiety, or one concern and as you receive the host, offer that care as your gift to Jesus with the silent prayer, Jesus remember me. And then let **us** remember Jesus, the compassionate king, who opened his arms on the cross to embrace the world and us, who holds our hands, offers support, and walks alongside us through the crying messes of our lives and like Mark's father, is willing to get white and sticky, while comforting and loving us.