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AMDG

Proper 29C, Pentecost 27 - November 20, 2016, Christ the King

What kind of king is this anyway?!?

It would have made so much more sense if Jesus had come off that cross and rained lightning bolts on all the centurions. It would have been so much easier to understand if he had sent laser beams shooting out of his eyes and melted the Pharisees and high priests in their tracks...and bestowed power and wealth on the disciples. Then this “King of Kings” would have made more sense to us.

Instead we have this weak, pathetic, and humiliated peasant, hanging on a cross with an insulting title tacked over his head. It’s almost too ironic to take to hear him telling the criminal dying next to him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” This is our King.

And, Jesus’ teachings would’ve been so much easier for us to take if he had simply said, “Be nice to one another,” or “Do a good turn daily,” or “Be respectful of one another.”

Instead he commanded, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Seriously?!? Who would want to follow this sort of King?”

And, if those commands aren’t enough, he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me.”

Tough words, impossible commands. And, Luke doesn’t pull any punches. He doesn’t fancy things up with lots of philosophical discourse, like John. He doesn’t rush it past us in a flurry of activity, like Mark. Luke gives us Jesus’ teaching straight, no chaser. And, if the commands and pronouncements aren’t enough, he throws in some improbable examples, “The Prodigal Son,” “The Good Samaritan,” Zacchaeus the tax collector, prostitutes, lepers. They’re all held up to us

as good examples of what the Kingdom is like. It could all be a bad joke or a Saturday Night Live sketch.

And, yet, here we are 2000 years later, proclaiming Christ the King, still trying to get our heads around it all, still trying to make sense of a King who would humble himself and take the form of a slave. Why are we still trying to follow this Jesus?

And, as much as we'd like to water them down, or ignore them, or bend the meanings to suit us, we can't get away from the truth of these teachings. Something deep inside of us won't let this go, knows, that however impossible, this **is** the way. It is the light of Christ inside of us that keeps won't let us ignore this strange way of life.

And, I can't make it any more palatable for you than Luke or I would be doing you a disservice. These **are** the things that Jesus commanded us to do. Jesus showed us the way to paradise, and ***it is the way of the cross.*** There's no way around it. We have to walk through it.

But, didn't Jesus die on the cross so we wouldn't have to?!? Yes, Jesus went through darkness and the shadow of death; he embraced the cross to show us that the cross is **not** the way of death. The way of death in fact, is staying stuck, not taking up the cross that lies before us. As James wrote, "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin."

We're not necessarily all called to literally die on a cross. Some of us do have terribly painful roads to walk. But, we **are** each one of us called to do thing we think we cannot do. Those are our crosses, and they can seem as painful as crucifixion. It's why we avoid them.

Like approaching a loved one with a difficult conversation.

or Facing, head on, the serious illness of a parent, spouse or child

or Giving a beggar money, even when we don't think they deserve it.

or Accepting criticism graciously

or Apologizing without excuses

or Facing an addiction or destructive habit

or Saying No.

or Forgiving someone who won't forgive us.

or Forgiving ourselves.

This is the mystery of our faith, the paschal mystery. Facing the things we know we must do, setting aside our fear and anxiety, walking our

difficult road, and trusting that what Jesus promised is really true - Nothing can separate us from God's love, and in fact it is our weaknesses that bring us closer to God. This is our redemption in Christ Jesus.

Each one of us has a cross we would rather not take up, and each one of us falls short of God's glory. Which is why Jesus used so many improbable examples, so many imperfect followers - to show us that it's OK to miss the mark; it's OK to fall short. What pleases God is not our trying to be perfect, but our imperfect trying, our desire to do the next right thing. What we must not do is fool ourselves into thinking that these teachings don't apply to our lives, or to our situation, or that there are circumstances that make Jesus' commands irrelevant. Or because I do this one good thing, I'm given a pass on the difficult thing. God would rather hear us say, "I'm not ready to do this yet; it's too hard. Please help me." than if we lied to ourselves saying, "This doesn't apply to me."

This is the life we're called to live. We take up our crosses daily, and stumble, and put them down again, and then hoist them back on our shoulders, again.

But, we're not alone. Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit delivers. I know it from experience. You can ask anyone who has had to walk their own Calvary. So, we ask for God's guidance and power, and we accept it when it's offered (sometimes just accepting help and comfort can be cross in itself). And, we pray...lots. We gather together in Eucharist for strength and renewal, and then go back out again and keep trying. And, in the process we experience the paradise promised to the thieves.

And, while Luke doesn't hold back in giving Jesus' commands to us; neither does he hold back on the promises. For it is in Luke that we get beautiful reminders of God's Kingdom -

The Kingdom of God is within you.

Strive for the kingdom, and all things will be given to you as well.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
And my own personal favorite, the Song of Zechariah,
In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.