



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

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Proper29C

Donna Barr

The liturgical church year concludes today with Christ the King Sunday and this reading of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Visualize for a moment this scene. After the humiliation of nakedness, Jesus is subjected to the physical agony of having great spikes hammered through his wrists to stake his arms upon the crossbeam on which he lies. He is then lifted upright in his place and hangs suspended from the spikes. A third great spike is then driven through his ankles. Since every crucified person is labeled, Jesus' cross bears his, reading "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The crowd gathered is aghast and dismayed at Jesus' sign addressing him as King. Most kings are usually born in a palace, but this king was born in a stable surrounded by donkeys, sheep and cows. While most kings spend all their time building up riches of silver, gold and jewels, this king owned nothing at all. While most kings surrounded themselves with servants, He chose to be a servant himself. He had often been found helping others. And the people he chose to be his friends – his closest friends were.....well shall we say.....sinners.....people who were from every economic level – people who were from every race and culture – people who were intelligent and people had difficulty in school – people who were popular and people who were outcasts – people who were athletes and people who couldn't even walk.....and people who needed forgiveness and well you know just people of every sorts and condition – people like you and me..... just Sinners.....like you and me.. But wait a minute; I see three crosses on that hillside...Jesus the King hangs in the middle of two common criminals. Three condemned men hang nailed to their crosses, slowly dying.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about her experience with three crosses in her book, Home By Another Way. She writes that, especially during the days before Easter, trios of crosses spring up across the countryside. Much work goes into making the crosses, digging holes and cementing them in the ground, painting them and then many are draped with flowing purple cloth She said she wondered why the person did not stop with one cross.....Wouldn't it have gotten the same message across? But as she thought about this longer she realized that one cross is not the same message as three crosses.

All the Gospel writers agree that Jesus did not die alone, although Luke is the only one who reports his conversation with the two who died with him. It all started after they had been hanging there for a while. But it is the man in the middle that holds everyone's attention, even that of his companions in agony. According to Matthew and Mark, they were robbers, but Luke does not even say that much, "Criminals," he calls them, so take your pick: thieves, tax evaders, runaway slaves.

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Established in 1847*

210 North Main Street Versailles, KY 40383 859.873.3481 [info@stjohnsky.com](mailto:info@stjohnsky.com) [www.stjohnsky.com](http://www.stjohnsky.com)



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Whatever they did, one of them did not think it was as bad as what Jesus had done, because he joined the crowd in jeering at him. *Aren't you the Messiah?* he sneered. *I thought you were the Messiah. Everyone says you are the Messiah. So why don't you get us out of here?* The other criminal heard this remark and snapped back. "Do you not fear God?" he said, defending the dying man between them. "We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Even on the cross, Jesus was surrounded by controversy, being attacked from one side and defended from the other. Luke does not name them but according to the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus, their names were Dismas and Gestas – Dismas being the criminal who defended Jesus and Gestas being the one who would have spit on him if he could.

Gestas was a bitter man, unable for whatever reasons, to own up to his demons. Lashing out and blaming others for his plight in life. Dismas, on the other hand, seemed to take responsibility for his misdeeds. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," he said. Hanging there on the cross, in pain and agony, Dismas still had hope. Jesus promises, "Today you will see me in Paradise."

It may seem strange to visit the cross just one week before we begin our four-week journey toward the manger, but I know that I am in need of a savior! Jesus' remarks from the cross in the Gospel of Luke reminds me of the kind of king who is coming. In deed, the most striking evidence of Jesus' majesty, the one that clearly distinguishes Jesus' kingship from all others, is his physical location on the cross. Here is King Jesus at his full majesty. The one bearing the burden of all our fears, our hatred, and our humanity.

Barbara Brown Taylor, remarks that wherever the symbols of the three crosses survives, the conversation with Jesus continues. Gestas and Dismas both have their say, while Jesus bridges the distance between them – the bitter man – the hopeful man....the lost and the found. There may be only one cross here today, but God knows we are all hanging on the other two. When ever we stand near his, we complete the tableau. One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses make a church.

*Amen*

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