



Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 2010

GOSPEL: Luke 23:33-43

33When 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. [[34Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And 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!” 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” 40But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

33καὶ ὅτε ἦλθον ἐπὶ τὸν τόπον τὸν καλούμενον Κρανίον, ἐκεῖ ἐσταύρωσαν αὐτὸν καὶ τοὺς κακούργους, ὃν μὲν ἐκ δεξιῶν ὃν δὲ ἐξ ἀριστερῶν. 34[[ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔλεγεν, Πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς, οὐ γὰρ οἴδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν.]] διαμεριζόμενοι δὲ τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ ἔβαλον κλήρους. 35καὶ εἰστήκει ὁ λαὸς θεωρῶν. ἐξεμυκτήριζον δὲ καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες λέγοντες, Ἄλλους ἔσωσεν, σωσάτω ἑαυτόν, εἰ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Χριστὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ ἐκλεκτός. 36ἐνέπαιξαν δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ στρατιῶται προσερχόμενοι, ὄξος προσφέροντες αὐτῷ 37καὶ λέγοντες, Εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, σῶσον σεαυτόν. 38ἦν δὲ καὶ ἐπιγραφή ἐπ' αὐτῷ, Ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων οὗτος. 39Εἷς δὲ τῶν κρεμασθέντων κακούργων ἐβλασφήμει αὐτὸν λέγων, Οὐχὶ σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός; σῶσον σεαυτόν καὶ ἡμᾶς. 40ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ ἕτερος ἐπιτιμῶν αὐτῷ ἔφη, Οὐδὲ φοβῆ σὺ τὸν θεόν, ὅτι ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κρίματι εἶ; 41καὶ ἡμεῖς μὲν δικαίως, ἄξια γὰρ ὧν ἐπράξαμεν ἀπολαμβάνομεν: οὗτος δὲ οὐδὲν ἄτοπον ἔπραξεν. 42καὶ ἔλεγεν, Ἰησοῦ, μνήσθητί μου ὅταν ἔλθῃς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν σου. 43καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀμὴν σοι λέγω, σήμερον μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ.

The Theology of Saint Dismas

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

The first thing we must say about this Sunday, the Feast of Christ the King, is that it is only 85 years old.

I know that's odd, because we suppose that the Feasts and Festivals of the Church Calendar have been around at least since the time of Jesus, if not before. But that is not so. The Calendar of the Church Year which we follow came into being over many centuries. And the designation of this Sunday, the final Sunday of the Church Year, as *Christ the King*, dates not from the time of Jesus, but to the year 1925.



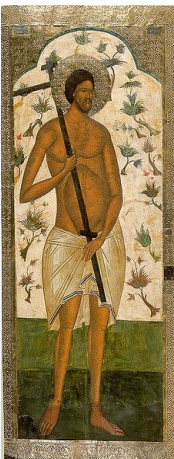
We have Achille Ratti to thank for its creation. Achille Ratti was a parish priest in Northern Italy who in addition to his parish duties was an avid mountain climber. [In fact there is to this day the *Achille Ratti Climbing Club* boasting a membership of 750 avid climbers.]¹ This parish priest, a climber, a scholar, a librarian turned 60 on the 31st May 1917 ... and less than 5 years later, on the 6th of February 1922, he was elected Pope, and took the name Pius XI.

Pius XI is known as the “Pope of Two World Wars” ... World War I and World War II. He died in 1939, before the end of the second war.

But, the year of which we speak is 1925 (it is the 16 Hundredth Anniversary of the Council of Nicæa, and Pius XI has just published an encyclical (a Papal Letter) entitled *Quas Primas* (which in Latin means “in the first” referring to the first letter that he wrote when he was elected Pope ... a letter that addressed the hardships and evils that he saw present in the world of his time).

But, in *Quas Primas*, in *this* encyclical, he instituted the Sunday that we are now celebrating ... “Christ the King” ... and he did it in order to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly supremacy, which in 1925 was claimed by *Il Duce*, better known as the Fascist, Benito Mussolini.

Pius XI ... I prefer to think of him as *Achille* – the Italian version of Ἀχιλλεύς (*Achilles*) the Greek hero of the Trojan War sung to glory in Homer’s *Iliad* ... *Achille* intended to proclaim the rule of *Jesus*, the gentle and loving kingdom of the one who according to the Gospel Storyteller we know as Luke and whose words we read this morning in our Gospel portion ... this gentle, peaceful, radically-outrageous loving *Jesus* dies at the hands of the Roman Army and from his *place of death* pronounces not anger and hate ... but forgiveness ... and by those words declares that the Holy One, the Eternal God, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth ... longs to welcome *everyone* into the unending time of God ... even sinners ... even those who believe they have no place in the family, at the table, in the community ... even the likes of *Dismas*.



Saint Dismas ... the subject of today’s Sermon ...

I would venture that if I asked you if you really knew who Saint Dismas was ... a goodly portion of you would not know the answer.

That’s all right, because *Dismas* is not mentioned in the Christian Scriptures we call The New Testament. He is not in the Gospels, he is not in the Letters of Paul, he is nowhere to be found. In fact, his name does not appear until the middle of the 4th Century ... 350 years after the Crucifixion of *Jesus*. And when his name does appear it is paired with another name that does not appear anywhere in the New Testament ... *Gestas*.

Let me read to you from that 4th Century Gospel of Nicodemus (sometimes also known as the *Acts of Pilate*):

Then Pilate commanded the veil to be drawn before the judgement-seat whereon he sat, and said to *Jesus*: Your nation has accused you as being a king: therefore I have decreed that you should first be scourged according to the law of the pious emperors, and after

¹ <http://www.achille-ratti-climbing-club.co.uk/>

that be hanged upon the cross in the garden from which you were taken: and let Dysmas and Gestas the two malefactors be crucified with you.²

Dismas and Gestas are the names given by tradition to the un-named criminals mentioned in the Gospel of Luke.

Let me continue:

And one of the malefactors that were hanged [by name of Gestas] said to him, saying: If you are the Christ, save yourself, and us. But Dysmas answering rebuked him, saying: Do you not at all fear God, seeing that you are in the same way condemned? and we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing amiss. And he said to Jesus: Remember me, Lord, in your kingdom. And Jesus said to him: Truly I say to you, that today you are with me in paradise.³

How very interesting. Whereas the Gospel of Luke (written well after the time of Jesus, more toward the end of the 1st Century) does not give *names* to the ones who are by tradition crucified with Jesus, only that they are criminals [Greek **κακούργων**, i.e. “Those who do bad things.”] ... tradition, loving to fill in the details, gives names to them.

Why? Because it is inconceivable that the son of the Holy One who calls each human creature by name would not in the name of the Holy One speak to those with whom he is dying anonymously. Perhaps it is a statement also against the horror of the Roman Government who after the time of Jesus’ death, when the Jewish-Roman War came to a final end ... put to death not just a trio of troublemakers outside the walls of Jerusalem ... but thousands (some say 3,000 or more ... including women and children) as a way of showing the efficacy of the *Pax Romanum*.



So on the Feast that celebrates the ultimate reign of God, the decisive victory of God over all that is evil and demonic, the Feast we call *Christ the King*, on this day at the conclusion of this Church Year we hear the conversation at the Crucifixion from the incredible pen of the Storyteller [Luke] ... it is a three-way exchange ...

“Save yourself and us too ... if you are who they say you are!” says *Gestas*.

“How can you say that,” retorts *Dismas*, and then turning his head to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And the answer, the final answer, “Today you are with me **ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ** (Luke uses the Greek word that actually comes from an Old Iranian root (*pairi-daeza*) meaning “a walled enclosure” ... but when it came into Greek, ancient Greek, the Greek before the New Testament Greek ... **παράδεισος** came to mean “a protected park for animals” or “a royal garden” ... and by the time of Jesus had come to be used as a term for the restoration of the Garden of Eden ... in other words, Jesus is saying (as Luke puts the words there on the cross) ... “Today you will come

² *Acta Pilati*, IX.5 (I have taken the liberty of “contemporizing” the language, which dates in translations from the early 1900s. I know of no *updated* translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus.

³ *Acta Pilati*, X.2

with me to the reality of God's full intention of beauty that began as we tell the story in the first Garden."



What's the intent? What's the meaning? What's the lesson?

Dismas is known as the patron saint of second chances, prisoners, criminals, reformed thieves, persons on death row and people who have made mistakes and seek forgiveness.

But, what's the lesson of God?

God, says Jesus, is a God, who in spite of all the forces of evil that appear in the world, in spite of all the malefactions of existence, will finally triumph in love.

God, says Jesus, is a God who, in spite of all the meanness of what we used to call in the church "principalities", will finally and ultimately win the day with overwhelming, unconditional, irrevocable acceptance and love.

God, says Jesus, is a God who welcomes all existence into the timelessness of God, without counting the cost, without measuring the weight ... who simply, and ultimately, and generously ... loves all God's children unto death and beyond death.

And that would mean each and every one of *us* ... and each and every one of *all humanity* no matter what, no matter who, no matter what sin has been done. God is that loving, that accepting, that welcoming.

And, because I will be asked sometime after this sermon is preached ... to the question, "What about Gestas? What about the other Criminal? What about the one who from his pain cried out to Jesus? Was he welcomed ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ?"

Yes, I believe so. What kind of loving, accepting, gentle Lord and God would do anything but?

Let us pray.

Eternal our God,

Your kingdom of love is coming because:

Somewhere someone is kind when others are unkind,

Somewhere someone is shares with another in need,

Somewhere someone refuses to hate, while others hate,

Somewhere someone is patient ... and waits in love,

Somewhere someone returns good for evil,

Somewhere someone serves another, in love,

Somewhere someone is calm in a storm,

Somewhere someone is loving everybody ...

And we pray that someone is us. **Amen.**⁴

Deo Gratias (+)
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⁴ Borrowed.