

Luke 23:33-43

I confess that I have not thought especially deeply about the conflict in Ukraine for quite a while, perhaps not since the early days of Russian invasion nearly four years ago now. There are so many claims on our attention in this attention economy that it is difficult to think well or deeply about any of the crises taking place globally or domestically, before something new and even more gruesome distracts us again.

But I found myself bemused by a recent article on religion in Ukraine by Marc Roscoe Loustou, which lays out the tricky situation many Christians are navigating there. Ukraine is largely an Orthodox country, but in Russian-occupied Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been outlawed. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church candidly supports the Russian government and the occupying forces. Ministers from a broad range of denominations, from Baptist to Catholic, have been arrested or told to get out. Russian forces have confiscated church property, and tens of thousands of believers have been forced to flee.

So religion has not been outlawed per se. Rather, in Loustou's words, "The occupation is best understood as Christians punishing Christians who refuse to say the invasion is divinely sanctioned." I see this, in fact, as a pattern repeated throughout history. That people tend to embrace the vision of God that supports their own access to power.

This is certainly true in the milieu of 1st-century Judea. Herod and his Temple cohort has capitulated to Roman authority as a means of holding on to his own power and wealth. For religious authorities, Jesus represents an assault on their access to control. He has to go. Pilate the governor isn't super concerned with individual ruffians, but he's happy to use the power of the state to send a message and keep rank-and-file Jews from getting any ideas. When he's asked to execute Jesus, Jesus is just another face in the crowd of rabble.

And so we commemorate this festival day of the Reign of Christ with a bit of a scriptural and theological puzzle. The king whose reign we celebrate is not sitting on a throne but hanging on a cross. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." The Messiah that we're always looking for comes in power, but this man, this Jesus, does not appear at first to have any. Even when they say, "He saved others," are they witnessing to his acts of

healing and salvation or doubting them? The inscription over his head might as well be written in sarcasm font: “This is the King of the Jews.” And part of the calculation must be the implied insult to Jewish people—what a shabby king you guys claim. Who, us? he’s no king of ours!

How do we see this now-familiar story with fresh eyes? How do we understand a “king” who won’t even lift a finger to salvage his own skin? Isn’t the answer the answer to our own dilemma? Why won’t God come and save us from crisis A or agony B? These are real questions that deserve a real answer. But as long as we’re tied to the belief that we know the best outcome and how to get there, the answer is going to remain unsatisfying.

Back in the days of Judges, you might remember, the nation of Israel begged for a king. The Lord God said, Look, no, you really don’t want a king. But people being people, we wanted someone who would be able to rattle sabers and scare off enemies. Someone who would bring anyone we don’t like to heel. We wanted to see revenge. And so ultimately God let Israel have a king. And God continues to let us have the kings and politicians we beg for, even when they aren’t good for us. Those are the consequences of free will.

But God has also given us an alternative to kings, Jesus the Messiah. Who shows up, not in a gilded chariot or a billion-dollar 747, but walking all the way from his home, in the hinterlands of the nation, to Jerusalem. The blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord—to give his life, to give us life. God who shows up precisely in the suffering of God’s people.

The word compassion comes from the root “suffering with,” and Jesus’ entry into history, drawing the sick and injured into wholeness, and ultimately dying our death, manifests a deep compassion. In the account of the gospels, when Jesus returns after his resurrection, he he still bears the wounds of his crucifixion, reminding us just how far he was willing to go to walk alongside us.

The Salt Project writes: “This is the ironic, revolutionary logic of the Gospels. In the very place that seems godforsaken — there, precisely there, God is present and active. Where God’s reign is mocked and Caesar’s reign seems triumphant — there, precisely there, God reigns. And that imperial inscription above Jesus’ head, the one meant to taunt,

intimidate, and demean — there, precisely there, God’s kingship is declared!”¹ If you have this understanding of the cross you’re not going to be interested in conquering anyone.

So there is an important distinction between asking God to bless our homeland and believing God is on “our” side, whatever side that might be. Just like the Russian forces in Ukraine, Christian Nationalism pretends that Christianity is bound up with national identity. But in fact Christianity is a global movement that transcends borders and parties. And the truth is that both evangelical and liberal Christians say we follow Jesus, but we’d probably all prefer that he’d jump down off his cross like a hero and save the day. That, however, is not the way Jesus uses his power.

I don’t pretend to understand this fully. Much of the time I would still prefer to have things work out the way I want them to, in affairs of worldly power and politics, as well as in my own life. But on some level I also believe that God’s ways are higher than my ways, and that all manner of things shall be made well.

On the hill of three crosses, we see a foretaste of this promise, when one of the two ne’er-do-wells joins in the jeers and insults of the others, while the other takes a thoughtful inventory of the ways he has been in the wrong. Jesus uses his power to declare pardon, pouring out grace and mercy over everyone—the wrong and the broken ones, even over us in all our ignorance: “Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

He assures us that In the midst of the worst moments, this tragedy, this trouble, even this death will not be the end. And in this last gesture we can locate both our marching orders and our hope. When he tells the crucified ruffian that he too can have paradise, he points us not just toward life eternal but also the life we are meant to live now, the one not based on conquering forces but on love and forgiveness. This king does not reign over a kingdom of wealth or privilege. Even as he is dying, Jesus opens his arms wider to enfold and alleviate others’ suffering. And he invites us to think about how we might also, whatever the cost might be.

Today, Jesus says, you will be with me in paradise. Today we in the practice of the presence of God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/18/power-and-mercy-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-reign-of-christ-the-king-sunday>