

I have always felt, after reading the Good Friday Gospel, that peaching is rather like the proverbial carrying of coals to Newcastle – an exercise of such superfluity as to border on the insulting. You've already been presented with the core of things.

So I draw your attention to one small piece of the Passion Narrative: The statement made by the crowd when Pilate tries to release Jesus. They say, 'If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar.' (John 19:12)

Contrast this with the manifest intention of God, that human beings discover that they are, each of them, kings. I'm reminded of that old rabbinic saying, which most of you have probably heard, that whenever a human being walks, there are two invisible angels preceding him or her, constantly crying, "Make way for the image of God." In the final prayer of today's service, we dare to ask God to provide ". . . to us sinners everlasting life and glory." (Book of Common Prayer p.282) It is the final request of the service in which human sin and failing is most prominent – and at its end the church dares to make to God a kingly request.

The crowd's statement is tragic, not just in its hostility to Jesus, and lack of recognition of who he is, but also in its hostility to the members of the crowd themselves and their lack of recognition of their own true identity. It is Caesar's rule over them and not the image of God in them which governs their search for identity.

Digression: If Christianity is true, and all human beings are, in some sense brothers and sisters through their sharing of the divine image, then we, in the church, need to be very careful about the sense we give to such words as "Lord", and make sure we don't fall into the trap of understanding God as the same puppeteer/manipulator that we find so often among the powers that be in this world. Whether God has the power to make things happen by efficient causation is not my fundamental question. Maybe God does and maybe God doesn't. The ability certainly seems to be used with restraint if he does. But that's not the issue for me. Rather, the root concern is what God desires for human beings, not whether God can or cannot make human beings act or determine their destinies after they have acted.

Ironically, the crowd, in complete unconsciousness, restates the tension between God and Caesar. Christianity, when it understands itself, is always in conflict with Caesar. What does this tell us about God? Well, I'm going to refer you to a hymn we haven't sung yet, but will sing shortly, #585 (*Hymnal 1982, Morning glory, starlit sky . . .*). This is a statement of what love is, and, therefore, of who God is. It is the farthest thing possible from the exclusionary concerns of Caesar who suffers no rival and if you are one, you are killed.

Vs 5. "Therefore he who shows us God helpless hangs upon the tree; and the nails and crown of thorns tell of what God's love must be. Vs.6 Here is God: no monarch he, throned in easy state to rein; here is God, whose arms of love aching, spent, the world sustain." The danger against

which Christianity must always guard is thinking that the Kingdom of God consists of a monarch reigning over creation rather than love sustaining creation. Yes, I'll go so far as to say that I think the image of God as king now has an utterly corrosive effect on the life of the church. The idea of God as king, meaning God who has the power to make things happen, removes from us, makes more distant, takes from our consciousnesses, the fact that it is God's desire that we be sustained, that we become kingly, that our freedom be built up. It is the refusal of human beings to accept this inner kingliness and to seek instead an outer monarch that is a good deal of the problem. God is our king, but from the inside out, not from the outside in.

Now, one last point. There's all kinds of language in the Christian tradition about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is nothing other than the presence of Christ in us, in the creation, now. The Holy Spirit is not some separate entity or thing – as soon as we start thinking that, we have become polytheists. It is the presence of Christ within us, Christ who shows God sacrificing himself for us. And because of that sacrifice we are shown what we are worth. The death of Jesus must express the desire of God if it is to have religious significance – and that means to affirm, to point to, the kingdom God desires for us. That is the God the church needs to seek, follow, proclaim and love.