

HOMILY

Feed the Right Wolf

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Homily for Christ the King

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Psalm 122; Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23: 35-43 (Year C)

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The good news sounds grim today. We hear “the rulers sneered . . . the soldiers jeered . . . at Jesus hanging on the cross.” It’s like the wolves have gathered at Calvary, patiently waiting to pounce on their prey. They watch for the one who strays from the flock, out of the shepherd’s sight, then they strike. That’s what sin does to us. We don’t act like human beings but more like animals engaged in the survival of the fittest.

Today, if you listen closely you can hear the Devil’s voice. He returns today. We hear the same sneering temptation as in the desert when Jesus began his ministry. Remember how, fresh from the waters of baptism, Jesus ventured into the wilderness to retreat; forty days in prayer and fasting with his Father. It’s there that the devil made his first contact with Jesus.

We heard this back in February at the beginning of Lent. Twice the devil taunted him, saying: "If you are the Son of God surely you can . . . turn a stone into bread, or throw yourself off the temple tower and let the angels catch you and float you down. You'll wow the crowd and they'll crown you king. I know these people, Jesus. They love power; they crave it. Whether it's fame, fortune, brute force or cunning influence, they respect power. Flaunt it and they'll follow you."

Back then, Jesus fended off the Devil, point by point. And St. Luke finished that episode, saying the Devil left him for awhile. It was a premonition.

Today, at Calvary, the Devil returns and we hear the same taunts, this time in the mouths of his own disciples. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." On Calvary, like in the desert, he hears three challenges: from the leaders, the soldiers, and from one of the thieves, all mocking him. Then there was that sign over his head, "This is the King of the Jews." Even his friends must have wondered, "He saved others; why won't he save himself?!"

This is where we have to wonder about the so-called "Christ the King." What kind of king is this? I hear that mockery, "Save yourself and come down from the cross!" And I must confess, at times, I wish he had come down from the cross, just to prove a point. I can see him freeing himself from the nails, angels lowering him to the ground; he steps forward and, with a snarl like Schwarzenegger, says "I'm back." There is a king I can get behind. One who can stand up to the enemy and put them down. We want a king who will lead us in a chorus of "Onward Christian Soldiers," not "Kumbaya." Or, if not the royal power, how about the pageantry? The news of the anticipated wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton sends goose bumps along our collective skin. This is the way we like to picture royalty – elegant, in palaces and coaches, not crosses. So give us power or pageantry, but spare us the pity.

Back in the desert, against the Devil, Jesus went point for point, three times. But on Calvary, he ignores the three challenges. Instead he responds only to the man of faith – the good thief who asks to be remembered in the Kingdom of God. Jesus stays focused on his mission.

Right before they began to mock him, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Afterwards, he sighed, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." He stays on message to complete his mission. He is a king who rules by example rather than by fiat. Remember when he told his disciples, "If you want to be considered great you must serve the least." And, "If you lose your life for my sake, you will find your life." Jesus does not take the crown for himself, but humbles himself allowing the Father to raise him in glory.

To the end, he is the "good shepherd." Jesus comes from a long line of great shepherds, like David, the shepherd boy who became Israel's king. Jesus

knew that the shepherd cannot be distracted, but must always watch the sheep (like a mother with a child just learning to walk). The shepherd works to keep the flock together and protect them from harm – those wolves. In a sense, the shepherd and sheep are one. This is his livelihood; without them, he and his family starve. So he risks danger for them, putting himself in harm's way, fending off the wolves. Jesus must stay focused on his mission.

He rules like a shepherd, always attentive to his flock. Now, there's a division here. Throughout his gospel, Luke distinguishes between two groups: the people and the leaders. Luke argues like a lawyer defending Jesus. He wants to demonstrate that it is the small group of leaders, both Roman and Jewish, who convict Jesus. But the people at large do not find fault with him. That's why Luke begins his passage saying, "The people stood watching while the leaders were mocking him." For Luke, these 'people' are a 'silent majority,' oppressed and powerless. The distinction is shown with the three crosses. One thief speaks for the leaders, mocking Jesus. The other speaks for the people, pleading in faith. And Jesus turns to him.

If it's true that each one of us carries his or her own cross, then no doubt we find ourselves sometimes surrounded by two thieves, one good, one evil; one friend, one enemy; one supportive, one destructive. To which one do we turn?

There is a Native American story called "two wolves." An old Cherokee man is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It's a terrible fight and it's between two wolves. One is evil: he is anger, arrogance, guilt and false pride. The other is good: he is joy, truth, humility and kindness. The same fight is going on inside you and inside every person, too." The boy thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee replied, "The one you feed."

We come here like that good thief. We recognize that Jesus, the one without sin, gave his life for us. Then we plead, remember us Lord in your kingdom. And he feeds us. Amen.

