*“Crown him the lord of love – behold his hands and side, rich wounds, yet visible above,*

*in beauty glorified. No angels in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bend their burning eyes at mysteries so bright.”* This third verse of the hymn *“Crown Him with Many Crowns,”* which we will sing later, reminds me of the Old Testament verse from Exodus in which God tells Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.” Those ancient believers felt that God's light shone so brightly that it would blind anyone who looked at it head-on. This belief carried forward to those who lived at the time Christ was crucified. Later writers combined two sights which seem totally at odds with one another: Jesus dying on the cross, his death causing the sun to be obscured and the vision of Jesus on the cross being so bright the only way to look at him was to lower one's eyes and see just part of the illumination. Either way, the people who were there when Jesus was crucified and those who learned of it later understood that what happened on that hill outside Jerusalem changed the trajectory of the world forever.

The first congregation I served had a huge sanctuary with a vaulted ceiling, tall stained-glass windows, slate floors, wrought iron communion rail and a massive altar. On top of the altar was a small, golden cross, no bigger than two feet tall. From the pews, the cross was almost lost in all the space and ornate architecture of the building. The size of the cross bothered one of the members so much that he offered to pay for a new one. He wanted not just a cross, but a crucifix with Jesus' tortured body upon it. We found a local artist who submitted drawings that were tweaked until the member's vision was satisfied. The artist then started work on the piece, which featured an almost life-size, very realistic bronze sculpture of Jesus, nails piercing his hands and side, his feet crossed with a single spike pounded through them, his head bowed down in surrender. It was spectacular and haunting. The first Lent after the crucifix was completed, we took down the altar cross and mounted the new piece on the wall behind the altar. The response was almost palpable. Every time the people looked up, they saw the crucified Christ in front of them. They had to look at him when the lessons were read, the sermon preached, the Lord's supper prepared and served. This sight of Christ's broken and crucified body so unnerved a good number of people that an agreement had to be reached that we would only put up the crucifix during Lent. The other times of the year, we left the smaller, less offensive cross on the altar.

Despite all of our action movie and video game addictions, ours is a culture that avoids death, real death, as much as possible. We speak about our loved ones passing away or going to be with the Lord, rather than dying. Some are so uncomfortable with the idea of death that they cannot visit a funeral home or attend a funeral. For most of us, I imagine, being at the site of Jesus' death would be so unbearable that we might feel like dying ourselves. And yet, we must linger there on the crucifixion hill, for that is where Jesus received his crown of glory, where he was named the King of all creation. *“Crown him the lord of love – behold his hands and side, rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.”* It is so hard for us to see beauty in this vision: the Son of God hanging on a cross, a crown of thorns pushed down on his head so hard that blood runs down his face and neck, two criminals, one on each side, crucifixion the punishment for their crimes, Jesus the innocent between them. This is the one of whom the angels sang, *“What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?”* How could this blameless child, born of a virgin, grow up to be such a threat to those in power that they kill him? *“This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds watch and angels sing.”* This is the one who gathers under his wing the flock that the world has scattered. Instead of waging war, he makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He welcomes a criminal into paradise even as he is taking his dying breath. He is the image of the invisible God. All things have been created through him. *“Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.”*

It is almost unbelievable that the babe, the son of Mary, would grow up to be the King of all creation. King of this planet, of our moon, of all the other planets and galaxies in the sky. He reaches out to all, not with a knife or sword or gun, but with hands that make peace. He gives us a rule to live by: love your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. He is the example we follow, caring for the poor, the widow and the orphan, carrying an extra coat in case we run across someone who needs it. He tells us stories that help us understand more about him and his kingdom: a story about an offensively generous employer who defies all conceptions of fair play by paying both those who have been working all day and those who labored just a few hours the same amount. We find out more about the kind of relationships Jesus wills for us in the tale of a father who humiliates himself again and again by running after his wayward son and his legalistic one as well. We get a hint of what will be expected of us in the story about the wounded man who was overlooked by the respected men of the day and only tended to by a despised foreigner.

I passed out images of an icon of Jesus that was painted most likely in the sixth or seventh century. This familiar image is called “Christ the Pantokrator,” that name one of the translations of the name of God in the Old Testament. The image of Christ the Pantokrator was one of the first images of Christ developed in the early Christian Church and remains a central icon of the Eastern Orthodox Church. As you look at this icon, see a man of humility, who brings peace to our world. Notice what could be the New Testament or the gospels in his left hand, the large cross on its cover proclaiming Christ's victory over sin and death. Look at his right hand, lifted in a gesture of blessing. His simple, peasant way of dressing, his beard and hair typical of a man of his time, the dark eyes that seem to hold all the pain of the world and yet offer a time when there will be no pain, the halo around his head rather than a crown – all these combine to show us a ruler unlike any other. He holds the world in his arms and promises peace.

You also have an artist's depiction of Jesus dying on the cross. Look at the two images side by side. One is a portrayal of how Jesus was killed by worldly powers, a crown of thorns on his head, a sign above him that truthfully, yet mockingly announces that he is the King of the Jews. The other an image of how Christ our King rules – with gentleness and kindness, with the power of God within him, with compassion and blessing. “*So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh; come, peasant, king, to own him. The King of kings salvation brings; let loving hearts enthrone him.”* Let *our* hearts enthrone him, be ruled by him, be enlarged to welcome all to his kingdom of forgiveness, love and grace.

Amen.

*Christ the King C*

*November 20, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 23:33-43*

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