

Christ the King  
November 21, 2010  
Luke 23:32-43

*Sic Semper Tyrannis*

The motto of the Commonwealth of Virginia, adopted in the middle of our country's violent revolution, I think aptly sums up our sentiments toward monarchy, royalty and to some extent Imperial power. *Sic Semper Tyrannis*, it reads, *Thus Always to Tyrants*, and the state seal pictures the personified spirit of the people of Virginia standing over the prostrate form of tyranny, his chains broken, his crown removed, his scourge neutralized. By violent and bloody revolution, we are a people without king, without royalty or nobility, a free people, a revolutionary people.

*Sic Semper Tyrannis* could have been the motto of the two men hanged on crosses on either side of Jesus. Luke tells us they were criminals, but their crimes are most likely crimes against the Caesar's crown, crimes committed in the name of God for the sake of their national and religious freedom.

There's no getting around it. By the time of Jesus, the hope of the coming Christ - always a hope with a political edge -- burned as revolutionary hope. The Messiah would be the one who would stand victoriously over the prostrate body of tyranny, having broken his chains, neutralized his scourge and knocked the crown from his head.

For those who fought -- and as these two had -- and as a result suffered and died in the name of liberty, to claim loyalty to God's Christ was to defy empire and imperial control. And as they hung in excruciating pain outside the walls of Jerusalem, it is not too hard to imagine them defiantly shouting to the soldiers -- "Give me liberty or give me death!"

Of course, Caesar's governor obliged them.

How often calls to arms and revolution and dreams of a people's paradise of liberty, happiness and prosperity end in bloody executions, in suffering, death and despair. Or how often do those who fight to throw off the bands of tyranny succeed only in unleashing an oppression of their own. Whether imposed from above or seized from below, violence and coercion; hatred and power are the form of tyranny whose chain still holds us fast and whose scourge we yet acutely feel.

*Sic Semper Tyrannis* is not the cry of liberty at all, but yet another sign of the oppression of sin and death that still enslaves us.

Above Jesus' cross they nailed the sign that proclaimed him king.

The message from Caesar by means of the governor reads clearly enough: All rivals to throne and crown will be crushed. But it is also at this point that we see most clearly that in our world everything is not as it should be. It is as if we have been living in a globe turned upside down.

Here is the picture. Three crosses. Three criminals, political criminals, revolutionaries all. Yet one is unique. The one in the middle -- we have learned by the Holy Spirit -- really is God's Christ, the anointed one, the savior of the world. Jesus too hangs there dying by order of the local authority of the Emperor.

The Emperor -- the one who by virtue of his power, wealth and glory aspires to deity, absolute power, in control of planet and people. It's Caesar who claims to be the bringer and keeper of peace on earth, who claims to be the benefactor and source of blessing for all nations under his rule. God's Christ by sharp comparison comes into the world a servant, lives as a servant -- poor, humble, weak.

Yet, here on this cross by his faith and love, by his body and his blood, Jesus saves the world.

Here he actually breaks the chains, lifts the scourge and removes the crown of power. In his dying breath, he breathes the forgiveness that makes a lasting peace.

Here Jesus takes us faithfully into the hands of the heavenly Father in hope of resurrection and the life of world to come.

Here from the cross we are ushered into the paradise of his kingdom, the glory of his throne, the majesty of power. His is a power that does not enslave, kill or destroy, but sets free, makes alive and creates. Jesus is in all he says and does, in his living and his dying; in his rising and ascending remains God's servant king. The leader of God's servant people, who live as he did in love by faith in God.

The criminal on one side will have no king, but the Messiah of power, violence and national self-interest. So, he curses Jesus in his failure to bring in the kingdom and taunts him in his weakness that forgives and refuses to resist but loves to the end.

But the criminal on the other side -- by the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit -- sees and hears the promise of God's kingdom come, God's will being done and longs to be in that place, numbered among Jesus' servant people. He longs to be one who follows the Messiah of love, reconciliation, peace, forgiveness. He longs to be free. Thus Always to Tyrants — not the sword, but the cross, not power, service.

It's not his motto that that was mistaken -- for God himself speaks those words -- *Sic Semper Tyrannis*, Thus Always to Tyrants. God himself longs for people to be free to live and love as he has created them to live and love.

It's that image that was all wrong. The way of freedom is not the genius of the people who stand triumphant over the dead body of tyranny. That bravado is but a lie. The image is this — the lamb who was slain is worthy to receive blessing and honor and glory because through him we are free from the power of sin and death and all the woes of power and violence. By the blood of the lamb, we can live free, servants all.

Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the savior of the whole world.

Yet for all its gentleness, love, forgiveness, peace, humility and meekness, our faith yet has a political edge. To name Jesus Lord, to live as servant disciples to the servant king is to make a choice to deny the power of all other lords and to turn our back on their empty promises. **In the end we are *not* a people *without* king as we imagine. But a people who live and serve a different kind of king. Amen.**