

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Christ the King, Luke 23:33-43

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

At the short end of the Captain Shreve High School gymnasium sits a shallow room – only twenty feet across but running the full width of the gym and having all its height, giving the space a cavernous feel and lending it a very loud echo. Identified on the campus map as the “Gym Auxiliary,” at one time the space served as the football team’s training facility, and the booster club spiritedly painted its cinder block walls green and gold, the school colors. However, when I came along in the late 1980s, only weight-bench bolt holes of those banner days remained in the raw, concrete floor, by that time filled with the cigarette butts of the metalheads who hid there during locker breaks.

For core academic subjects, Shreve sorted students by test scores, but no such divisions existed for our mandatory Physical Education. In “Gym,” neither GPA nor social status exempted one from subjugation to a more primal hierarchy, one based on speed and power, the consistency of one’s jump shot and the threat of one’s right fist. Every hour of the school day contained at least one section of Gym from each year: Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior. All these classes shared a common locker room, and, on rainy days and special occasions, all the sections – from the freshmen to the seniors – convened in the Gym Auxiliary to play **Slaughter Ball**.

After first hour ended, word of Slaughter Ball would seep into Shreve’s hallways, news smoldering with dread for some, thrill for others, and adrenalin for all. Once dressed out at our appointed hour, Coach would lead us into the Auxiliary through its single entry, a set of double-doors, the crash bars of which he would – literally – wrap with a heavy chain so no student could escape. Ten partially deflated sports balls – volleyballs and red-rubber balls of various sizes – would be set along a fraying line of duct tape centering the room. The coaches would then direct a few seniors to divide the group into two enormous teams, often selected for domination and spectacle, rather than competitive balance. In smoky street clothes and rotting gym uniforms, we would take positions against one another at the most-distant, opposed walls, yelling and screaming and jumping and pointing toward each other and ourselves ... more than 100 teenaged boys ... *on fire*.

A whistle would blow, and *the lights would go out*.



In the darkness, four squatty ventilation windows at the top of the long wall allowed just enough gray light to enter the room that shapes – howling, winged wraiths – could be discerned moving and crying out in the pitch. Blind and crazed, the echoing of running feet and screams were a train roaring through a station, and we sped in the dark toward the center line to paw for one of the deflated balls. Anything could happen in those dark seconds. *Anything.*

On this, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, we celebrate the kingship of Jesus, and we look forward to the reign of God: a peaceable kingdom graciously realized among a faithful citizenry covenanted to love and mercy, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, to the care of the cosmos and the dignity of every human being.ⁱ Looking forward to that new rule, we reflect on the Empire that crucified Jesus, as well as the Kingdom subjugating us and those to which we subject ourselves. We seek to discern the relief between the world that was; the world that is now; and “the life of the world to come,” as the Nicene Creed voices our hope.

Today’s Gospel reveals as much about our earthen realm as the King who came to save us from our base inclinations. Indeed, the innocent Jesus hangs beside criminals, “*and the people stood by, watching.*”ⁱⁱ Considering what kind of citizenry would crucify the very Son of God, then, we confront not only our complicity in action, but the horrors of our complicity by *inaction*. Listen to that admission reverberate through the text as a refrain:

“The leaders scoffed at [Jesus], saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’”ⁱⁱⁱ

And the people stood by, watching.

“The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’”^{iv}

And the people stood by, watching.

Even one of the criminals hanging and dying beside Jesus, “kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’”^v

And the people stood by, watching.

Without warning, the flash of the lights’ return would spark a new chaos as the Slaughter Ball game officially began – customarily with an early, side-armed hurl clocking the most awkward kid in class to an uproar of laughter. If a ball hit a player, then that player was out, and being “out” meant standing against the wall, where you’d better keep your attention fixed on the game, because another ball could – *would* – come screaming straight at your grill. Ostensibly, the goal was to get everyone on the opposing team out ... but there were other goals. Most often, my goal was survival. Which is not to claim that the experience was not exciting, or that I wasn’t competitive, or that I didn’t sling one of those deflated

volleyballs with everything my skinny arm could muster, but there was always a terror – and in thoughtful moments, a sadness – attendant to the competition.

As more players lined the walls, the whistle would blow again, signaling those standing along the perimeter of the room to march forward, shoulder to shoulder, shrinking the boundaries of the game and creating a human coliseum. No longer could players still in the game hide behind ranks of teammates. Instead, a 5-on-1 final match meant watching the most gifted athletes in our school – which seemed always to include a future defensive tackle for the Green Bay Packers – run toward the one remaining player on the opposing team, who would be doubled over on his knees, his hands above his head, and watch them unleash five, point-blank rounds at the nape of that child’s neck. And the only fate feared more than being that one pummeled in the sweaty center of the mob was imagining what might happen if you allowed that lonely kid to pass through your place in the perimeter.

While I might be tempted to cast myself as a victim of those days, be sure that I played those teenaged games to win. Despite my fears, my empathies, and my unease, I can conjure the emotional echo of those ignoble desires driving me on rainy, sixth-period afternoons more than three decades ago. And, if I pay attention, I can still sense them racing through me even now, lurking in the loosely chained recesses of my heart.

See, the coliseums of sport and business and politics tempt us to keep our memories conveniently short, our ethics pliable, and our decency optional. Hiding under a thin gauze of cherry-picked “righteousness,” we pursue the world’s power – promising to be good with it, better than the one who has it now! – and we trust the momentum of our more honorable forebearers will even the scales if what we want requires us to concede a few virtues along the way. Friends, be sure this is not good enough to distinguish us, to free us from subjugation. Indeed, as long as our desires for power exists, our desires for victory, our desires for any selfish end that is not the triumph of God alone, *then there are no victors*. As long as the game exists, *all of us lose*, leaving us not to wonder the mechanics of the Kingdom’s coming, but to confront whether we really want the Kingdom to come at all. We disciples of Jesus – praying for love and mercy, but playing to dominate and shame – will find ourselves conspirators of the Crucifixion, rather than citizens of the Resurrection. And when the world falls, we – *a complicit part of that world* – will fall with it.

To live as God hopes, to build the Beloved Community God dreams, we cannot depend upon someone else’s heroism to rescue us from the foot of the cross, and, if we have not diligently – *faithfully* – prepared our own hearts for that moment, then we will not be able to depend even upon ourselves. No, we must steel ourselves *daily*, stepping into the broken, violent kingdom as individuals and as institutions, crying humbly, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” and doing what is right and generous and good ... every day ... in all we do ... over and over and over again.

We are fortunate that in our season of history and in this nation, we have the privilege of choosing in which institutions we will invest our first gifts and our highest hopes. And on this last Sunday of our Stewardship season, I am proud to name that **I choose the Church**, and I choose the Church without blushing for its institutional imperfections, for I do not choose just any church, but I choose The Episcopal Church ... and not just any Episcopal church, but Trinity Church in the City of Boston – *this* Episcopal church – because I want to be part of a movement greater than the reach of my selfish desires, greater still than the cruel, self-serving, fascist powers of this world. In faith, I want to stand with *you* ... and with those we serve ... proud and grateful – relieved! – that we have built this Body of Christ *strong* on the day that we and the world need it, rather than grieving that we did not do enough when we could have done more, had we only the will and wisdom to do so.

On this, Christ the King Sunday, we join with the One who has stepped into the violent breach before us, who models mercy and pleads, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”^{vi} On this, Christ the King Sunday, we take heart in Jesus’ promise to the criminal hanging at his side, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”^{vii} And while we may share in the common tragedy of our contemporary condition, we celebrate that we also share in a common hope – that the way things are, the way we feel our country and the world are inevitably going, this is not the way it always has to be. For that new world, **let us choose the Church**, and make way for another way.

In the name of the King of kings and Lord of lords,
Amen.

ⁱ As in the “Baptismal Covenant,” pp. 304-305, in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*.

ⁱⁱ Luke 23:35a.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 23:35b.

^{iv} Luke 23:36-37.

^v Luke 23:39.

^{vi} Luke 23:34.

^{vii} Luke 23:43.