

## CHRIST THE KING

**TEXT:** Luke 23:33-43

I believe it would help us if I gave a little background on our lectionary topic for today. First, a confession. I do not remember learning much about Christ the King Sunday in all my years of church attendance. So this is as much for me as it is for you – or maybe just some of you who perhaps have more knowledge of this than I do. But, here goes.

For the past year we have been on a journey through the Christian church year. We have followed in the steps of Jesus as he was born in a stable; as he walked the dusty hillsides of Galilee; opened blind eyes and made the lame to walk again; as he taught the multitudes and the disciples; as he was crucified, and rose again. We have celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, reflected on the mission of the Church, and what it means to be a disciple of the Christ. Today is the last Sunday of that journey for this year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent as we once again begin that journey to remind ourselves who we are and whose we are.

We do this knowing that the Kingdom of God that Jesus brought is a present reality in our lives. And yet we also know that there is a future Kingdom over which God will reign in Christ, a Kingdom in which the world will once again fully reflect its creator. Today we celebrate Christ as past, present, and future King over all the earth, at the same time that we express our hope and our faith in that coming Kingdom.

So, today, before we begin a new church year with the events of Advent and the Nativity, we look back over the story of the life of Jesus and the concept of Christ the King. Pope Pius instituted this celebration in 1925, proclaiming that Christ the King rules not only over the church, but over the entire world – if not now, then at the end of time.

Today, the language of kingship is outmoded and offensive to many, and there are good reasons for this. We don't live under kings, so the metaphor feels irrelevant to us. And we're rather repulsed at how the reigns of kings often meant a reign of terror for most subjects – massive wealth and power attained by cruelty and exploitation, which was then passed on by birthright to people who did nothing to deserve it. In fact, with the exception of Princess Diana (and I suppose now Kate and Meghan) most U.S. citizens have not been too keen on royalty since the days of George III. I also note that those three women were not born into royalty; they came to it by marriage.

So when we talk about the Kingdom of God, and Christ as the King, we need to understand the context in which we are delving. The Kingdom of God is not simply about supplanting an earthly ruler with a heavenly one. In heralding the coming Kingdom of God, Jesus was not advocating regime change. Rather, Jesus was announcing the advent of an entirely different way of being in relationship with each other and with God. It's not the ruler that changes, but the realm in which we live.

I know that's a little hard to conceptualize, but we can look to Jesus for help. As he has done throughout his ministry, he has given us parables to give us a glimpse of what this is all about. So what kind of king are we looking at here? What about the story of the audaciously, even offensively generous employer who defies all conventions of fair play by paying both those who have been working all day and those who labored just a few hours the same pay? Think about the father who humiliates himself again and again by running after both his wayward and legalistic sons? We get a hint of what will be expected of us in the tale about the wounded man overlooked by the best and brightest only to be tended by the despised foreigner. These are just glimpses, of course, but they are enough for us to know that everything in the realm of God will be different.

Probably harder for us to completely grasp is that the realm of God over which Christ is King reigns is not lurking somewhere "out there". It is already here among us. This means, of course, that we presently live in *both* realms. We are citizens of this world and citizens of the kingdom Jesus inaugurated. Much of our lives are governed by

the rules of this world, rules that while they can be improved will never usher in the justice, the equity, the shalom that God has promised. At the same time, having had a glimpse of the realm Jesus describes, we can never be satisfied with the way things are.

So let's go back to today's reading from Luke. Was it a little surprising to you? Why in the world are we focusing on the crucifixion just before the time leading up to the birth of Jesus? What is the writer of Luke trying to tell us?

Luke tells us of the power of mercy, the underlying message of the Gospel. This passage challenges us to expand our notions of who deserves mercy. It gives us three instances of mockery leveled against Jesus. Stating only that Jesus was crucified alongside two criminals, Luke's narration does not dwell on the mechanics of crucifixion. Luke's audience would have been aware of its horrific details. Nevertheless, the mockeries communicate how dismal things had become for Jesus. The taunts get closer and closer to him, giving the reader a sense that the forces against Jesus are closing in on him. The Jewish leaders are close enough for Jesus to hear them; the soldiers, who had already taken his garments, come up to Jesus as they mock him, and the final act of derision comes from someone right next to Jesus.

The taunting challenges Jesus to save himself as a demonstration of his identity as "Messiah of God", "chosen one", "King of the Jews". The first criminal, on the cross so close to him, joins the others and demands that Jesus save them all from being crucified. The second criminal also asks something of Jesus, but his request contrasts the first criminal's selfish, impertinent demand.

While others in the scene use titles to mock Jesus, showing they do not really believe Jesus to be the Messiah and King, this second criminal accepts in utter sincerity the inscription on Jesus' cross, identifying him as "King of the Jews". He asks that he be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom. He speaks to Jesus in a startlingly personal and intimate fashion, addressing Jesus directly by name and not with a sarcastic use of a title.

In response, Jesus grants him salvation. His words in Luke begin with an “Amen” saying literally “Amen to you I say”, thereby introducing the pronouncement with solemn assertiveness. Here, at the cross, Jesus’ salvation becomes a reality to this criminal and a possibility to any of those who hear and believe. The criminal acknowledged his own guilt and Jesus’ innocence and made a sincere request that Jesus remember him. Jesus uses his power as “King” to dispense mercy in a boundlessly gracious fashion that far exceeds what is asked of him.

What kind of king is this, who welcomes a criminal into his realm and promises relief and release amid obvious agony? It is a king who refuses to conform to the expectations of this world, who will be governed neither by its limited vision of worthiness or its small understanding of justice. It is a king who is not content to rule from afar, but rather comes to meet us in our weakness and need. It is a king willing to embrace all, forgive all, redeem all, because that is his deepest and truest nature. It is, finally, our king, come to usher us into his kingdom even as he implores us to recognize and make known that the kingdom is already around us.

This One, you see, strung up by the Empire for treason and insurrection is, as it turns out, not merely *challenging* the orders of the world but *overturning* them altogether and establishing a new reign governed not by might, power and judgment but rather by love, mercy and grace. For he is the King, reigning from his unlikely throne, granting mercy and justice and peace to all.

The season of Advent is ahead. It is a time of hope and peace and joy and love. It is our time to welcome Christ the King once again into a waiting world. Amen.