

## **What Kind of King? – Luke 23:33-43 – November 20, 2016**

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Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the final Sunday of the liturgical year, the day we recognize and proclaim the sovereignty of Christ and our allegiance to him. This Christian holiday is one of the newer feast days, instituted in 1925 by the pope. It was created as a response to the instability in the world following World War I and the rise of Mussolini and the Fascist Party. Pope Pius XI warned the church against the rise of secularism and of following worldly dictators. Christ the King Sunday was a reminder to the church of its ultimate leader Jesus Christ.

As we've been studying Luke's gospel this past year, we recall that it began referencing a leader who was to be born and who would be given the throne of his ancestor David. He would be one whose kingdom would have no end. We read stories of how angels appeared to the elderly priest Zechariah, the young girl Mary, and a group of shepherds tending their herd. The angels proclaimed the birth of one who would usher in the reign of God.

Then in Matthew's Gospel, the Magi came from foreign lands to pay respect to the newborn King, bringing him expensive gifts. Throughout his life, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. His final week, he entered into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey as the crowd proclaimed, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." And at the time of his death, Pontius Pilate sarcastically, but truthfully, proclaimed him to be the King of the Jews.

This kingly theme or royal reign ran throughout the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. But as his story unfolds, it doesn't take long to realize that this king is different from anything we might have expected.

Any time a new leader comes to power, the question is, what kind of leader will he or she be? How a person leads has a direct impact on those who follow. On their livelihoods, on their wellbeing, on their futures. What impact will this new leader have? As we prepare for new leadership in our own nation, all eyes are on our president-elect as we wonder and speculate about the kind of leadership he will provide. We wonder what things might change or what might stay the same. One's words and actions are illustrative of the type of ruler one will be.

So what kind of king is Christ? In Luke's gospel, through his teachings to his disciples, Jesus has provided the blueprint for his reign. The kingdom of God is like a father who, with open arms and words of love, welcomes home his wayward son. The kingdom of God is like a shepherd who cares so much about his flock of 100 sheep, he goes after the one who has come up missing. The kingdom is like a banquet feast, where the host opens the table to the poor and the lame and the afflicted.

We quickly come to recognize that the reign of Jesus Christ is one that runs counter to all worldly expectation. Perhaps our gospel lesson this morning is the epitome of irony. We read the story of Good Friday, a passage that seems more at home during the season of Lent. A bit strange to be read this time of year. A passage about an innocent man, beaten and

bloodied, abandoned by his disciples, hung to die on a hill between two criminals. Doesn't quite portray the image of a king, does it?

We come this morning to find Jesus nailed to a cross, a sign posted over his head – King of the Jews. The soldiers mocked him, "What kind of king are you? Why don't you come down off that cross and save yourself?" The leaders of the Jews scoffed, "What kind of king is he? He could save others, but he can't save himself." Even one of the criminals hanging next to him, jeered, "What kind of king are you? If you're the Messiah, save yourself, and while you're at it, save us, too!"

Kings aren't supposed to be tortured and murdered. Kings are supposed to wield power and authority. Kings don't die, they send others to die for them. Kings don't humble themselves or submit themselves to the will of others. But throughout his life and at the moment of his death, Jesus undermined the whole concept of what it meant to be a king. Worldly kingdoms are about power, control, and wealth. But Jesus was about service to others and humility. Worldly rulers use force and power to carry out their wills. But Jesus modeled peace, love and reconciliation. Worldly rulers socialize with the upper crust, with the elite. Jesus hung out with sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and the poor.

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as being counter to every standard of worldly power. The last would be first, and the first would be last. The powerless would gain power. The downtrodden and the poor would be blessed. The rich and powerful, on the other hand, would be in for a rude awakening. Peace, forgiveness, and mercy would be the norm. Reconciliation and harmony among all peoples would be the goal. Equality among the classes, the races and the genders would be the expectation. This is the kingdom that Jesus preached. So it is really not that surprising that Jesus would sacrifice himself, for all of humanity, for all of us. That's what the kingdom of God looks like.

Even as he hung on the cross, Jesus was still the king of this, God's kingdom. Despite his physical and mental pain, he was able to offer forgiveness to those who were carrying out his execution. Rather than condemning them for their terrible crimes, he prayed for them. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Forgiveness is at the heart of the kingdom of God, and Christ our king, offers forgiveness to all. In the midst of his agony, Jesus was able to show forgiveness and compassion to his enemies.

Furthermore, this king put the needs of others before his own. Two other men were being crucified alongside Jesus that Friday afternoon. One man derided him, the other man realized something that everyone else seemed to miss. He recognized that not only was Jesus wrongly condemned, but that he was indeed a king. He acknowledged his own need for punishment for his crimes, but he asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. He saw something in Jesus that made him recognize his own sin. He saw that Jesus was judged wrongly. While others scorned him for his seemingly delusional kingship, the man who truly was at his wits end turned to Jesus and looked for salvation. And he asked Jesus to remember him.

This man needed forgiveness and hope. So he turned to the only one who could give that to him. Jesus could have ignored him. He certainly wasn't in much of a position to offer a lot of encouragement. But Jesus saw this man's need, and through his own pain, he offered him assurance and salvation. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

I find it interesting that Jesus uses the word "today." He didn't say, "In three days after I am resurrected, you'll be with me in Paradise." Nor did he say, "At the end of time, when I come back in all my glory, you'll be with me in Paradise." He said "today." The kingdom of God is here, now. Despite appearances to the contrary, the kingdom of God has broken through the darkness of this world.

Where is this kingdom? Any time enemies put aside their differences to respect and accept each other, the kingdom of God is present. Any time warring factions put down their weapons and seek to work together in peace, the kingdom of God is present. Any time estranged family members seek forgiveness from the one they've wronged, the kingdom of God is present. Any time people put aside their own needs in order to meet the needs of others, the kingdom of God is present.

The kingdom of God is present whenever words of forgiveness are spoken, when peace wins out over violence, when prejudice turns to open-mindedness, when reconciliation takes the place of separation, when goodness prevails over evil, when people make the decision to do what's right rather than what's easy. The kingdom of God is present when people come together to worship, when the word of God is proclaimed, when babies are brought for baptism, and when the people of God gather around the table to share the bread and the cup.

Because Christ is our King, then we are part of his kingdom. As his people, we are called to follow the model he has given to us. He showed forgiveness to those who so greatly wronged him. We too are to show forgiveness to those who have mistreated and offended us. He showed compassion for the downtrodden. We too are to show love and mercy for the poor and the exploited.

The kingdom of God is like nothing we could ever expect or imagine on our own. A place where harmony, equality, peace, forgiveness and love are normative. Christ our King came into this world to show us what it means to live in this kingdom. He is our model, he is our guide. He is indeed our king.