

“Jesus Our King”
Luke 23: 33- 43

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According to the liturgical calendar which we follow, today is “Christ the King Sunday,” which marks the end of one liturgical year—Year C, in case you were curious. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Advent, and we will begin a new liturgical year—Year A, in case you were curious to know which letter comes next.

This is Christ the King Sunday—but honestly, what do we Americans know about kings? Aside from a couple of you—John Fraser and John Mather, who were born and raised in the United Kingdom—here in the United States, we haven’t had a king for over 200 years. Our leaders are elected, not inherited, and I suspect it’s pretty hard to wrap our heads around the idea of having no say about who is on the throne. Our very democratic way of governing, though, also keeps us from understanding how important it is—especially now, in this day and time—to view Christ as our king. For starters, Christ is not someone whom we put into power; we did not elect Christ as our king, we did not support his platform, we did not contribute to his campaign.

We didn’t choose to make Jesus our King, which is the good news—the gospel message—because Quite the opposite, for “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We didn’t choose a king who would save us, but God so loved us first, that God sent Jesus our King to save us. If it were up to us, based on our nature and behavior, Jesus would not be our candidate for king.

Once again, I am going to share a little history because ancient Israel didn’t have kings until things began to get a little dicey for the Israelites who had moved into the Promised Land, and things weren’t going so well for them. So elders went to Samuel, who was the chief priest and prophet and said, “Give us a king to govern us, like other nations.” *We want to be like, look like other nations so give us a king.* Samuel replied with a warning, “If you have a king, he will take your sons and make them serve in his army, and tend the king’s land, and be at his beck and call. And he will take your daughters, and they will be forced to cook and clean for the king. And he will take the best of your field and vineyards and orchards and given them to his wealthy friends. He will seize your livestock and you will all live like slaves. And you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourself.” You can read it for yourself in I Samuel 8.

But even after hearing Samuel’s dire warning, the Israelites said “No! By golly, we are determined to have a king, like other nations, and that our king will go out before us and fight our battles for us.” And so the Lord said to Samuel, “All right, if they want a king, they can have a king,” and that began the cycle of kings, some good, some evil, all flawed—until Jesus Christ came into the world, until Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross.

Then it seems like the human concept of king was turned inside out. Instead of a king who would be a leader, this king is mocked by soldiers who, while he hung on the cross, offered him sour wine saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Instead of a king who would fight battles for his people, this king has a sign placed over his head, as Jesus' did, on which the words, "This is the King of the Jews," were written. And what kind of king responds to the whispered request of a thief on the cross who asked, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," with the word, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Eberhard Busch writes, "These last moments of Jesus' life all seem to be in contrast to what is valued as great in our world. The world presented to us in newspapers or on television is not poor, but is a world of glamour. In this world, the ideal is to be rich and beautiful and influential. The pressure of this deal is like an infection that overtakes us as we strive for it. In this world, one has to be successful. In this world, the slogan is "Help yourself!" and with this slogan you may survive."

Because even if most of us weren't raised in a country governed by a king, we have a pretty good idea of what constitutes king-like behavior. Being in charge. Breaking free from the chains of oppression. Strong actions of leadership or deliverance. Again, Dr. Busch notes, "This passage from Luke takes us by the hand and gives us the surprising news: Christ is the highest, and he has to suffer awfully. The Lord above all lords is exactly the same one who was humbled on the cross; no other is the Lord. Conversely, this man who is beaten and driven into death has more power than all those who sit in positions of authority and who have forced down so many men and women."

Centuries ago, the prophet Jeremiah described the kind of king for whom the people of Israel longed; really, the kind of king or leader for whom we long: a king who will bring unity and not division, one who will tend to his flock and not ignore them, a king who will encourage his flock to be fruitful and productive, one who will protect and comfort his flock, a king who will search for the least and the lost, a king who will practice wisdom, execute justice and righteousness.

A true king would be one who ruled over more than a nation, but ruled over the world. A true king would be served out a sense of thanksgiving and gladness and not fear. A true king would not be limited by demands of time or space, but lord over time and space. A true king would never disappoint his people or forsake them or forget them, but would remember and care for each and every one of his subjects.

Which makes the dying thief's request "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," all the more remarkable. Why on earth would this dying thief regard the bloody, bruised man hanging beside him on the cross as his king? Instead of looking at Jesus as one criminal regards another criminal, as the first thief does, this thief looked at Jesus with all the awe and confidence that a peasant would bestow upon royalty; as if Jesus bore a crown instead of a

cross. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Perhaps as one gets closer to death than one sees things more clearly, in a new light. Certainly it could not be because Jesus looked like a king. A king, even in Jesus' day, was all about appearances and Jesus' appearance left much to be desired. Isaiah describes him this way, "so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals, so he shall startle many nations, kings shall shut their mouths because of him. . . he had no form or majesty that we should look at him. . ." No majesty that we should even look at him, and yet the dying thief who hung beside him saw a king and a kingdom unlike any king or kingdom he had ever known on earth.

The dying thief saw Jesus as a king who gained power through humility, one who laid aside his crown in order to walk, talk, eat and drink among his subjects. He saw Jesus as a king who washed the feet of his disciples. He saw Jesus as a king who brought forth life and renewal, not death and destruction. He saw Jesus as a king who ruled by calling people to love one another. Jesus reigned as king by using the power of grace: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." The thief could see that Jesus was more than just a king of a nation, he was the king of hearts.

And I'm not sure that we can envision this kind of king unless we are in the same position as that thief. Unless, like the thief, we exhaust every appeal for help to from every power on earth and still face death. Unless, like the thief, we honestly declare our sinfulness. Unless, like the thief, we face the consequences for our sinfulness. Unless, like that dying thief on the cross, we are utterly without resources, without answers, without hope except in the One who knows what it means to be in that same position. The One who is King, and seeing our every weakness and vulnerability and sinfulness, breathes the promises that we, his undeserving subjects, shall be with our King in the most unlikely place of all: Paradise.

When we, like the dying thief, offer who we are and what we can give, we find that Christ our King is neither judgmental nor bad-tempered. Christ our King is the one who approaches the woman at the well. Christ our King shared a meal with Zacchaeus, accepted the doubting Thomas, forgave Peter, turned the persecutor Paul into a great servant of the new church. Christ our King is the one who hears the request of the dying thief and assures him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Christ our King conquers hearts instead of lands. He isn't a king who stays on the throne but who steps down to take our hand when we stumble. Christ our King looks not to his own needs, but to the needs of his subjects. Christ our King laid aside his own glory in order to shelter us from life's storms, shade us from the heat of trouble, or calm us when terrors come in the night. He is a king who does not put himself above us but draws each weak, sinful, sorry one of us closer to him. A king who guides us, leads us, protects us, rules in love in our hearts all the days of our

lives. A king who does not condemn us, no matter how great our sin, who graciously welcomes us into Paradise with him.

This week, in on her website, *Journey with Jesus*, Debi Thomas writes, “Even as Jesus hung on the cross, he spoke hope to a thief who needed solace. He hung in the gap between one man's derision and another man's hunger, absorbing both into his broken body. *This is our king*. My prayer for this hard season in America's history is that we will find ways to walk as Jesus walked — to spend ourselves for love of the Other. To listen, to protect, to endure, and to bless.”

Thomas continues: “In my own life right now, I am strengthened by the love of my friends, and by the fierceness with which people of faith are rallying to shield the vulnerable from terror and harm. The truth is, the Church has always proven itself in times of peril. Peril brings forth prophets. It lights holy fires. It teaches us the radical nature of love.

After Christ the King Sunday, we will enter into Advent, a season of waiting, longing, and listening. Holding firm to our vision of a better kingdom, we will walk into the expectant darkness, waiting for the light to dawn, and straining to hear the first cries of new life. Yes, there are reasons for fear right now. Reasons for anger, reasons for grief. But we are not a people bereft of hope. We are not abandoned. We know where to look for paradise. We have the right king for this hour. “

In this season of giving thanks, may we give thanks for a king who reigns in our hearts as well as in our world. And may God allow us to worship our Jesus as the king of our hearts, as the king of all hearts; and give us the courage to serve our king in his kingdom of love and forgiveness.