

Christ the King (Luke)

Scripture: Luke 23:32-43

In the church calendar, today marks the end of what is referred to as “Ordinary Time”. Other parts of the church calendar follow particular events or seasons like Lent or Advent or Easter, but the people who come up with such things left the half of the year between Pentecost and the first Sunday in Advent just to be called “Ordinary Time”. We have used almost all of Ordinary Time this year to dig deep into the Gospel of Luke, and we conclude that today. Luke is not going anywhere, and we’ll be back. But we will turn to the prophet Isaiah for Advent starting next week.

This last Sunday of Ordinary Time is named Christ the King Sunday. The church calendar is in a cycle that begins with Advent and comes back around to Christ the King. We go from anticipation and expectation for the coming of the Messiah through study of His life and ministry, including His teachings, His death, and Resurrection. As we go, we find the Word of God in the Law and History and Wisdom and Prophet of the Old Testament speaking to us. Then we begin Advent again, and return to the theme of anticipation and expectation of the presence of God that we should be living in all the time. On Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate the rightful place of Jesus Christ as the one true King, ruler of heaven and earth, and ruler of each of our lives.

If you came to you with an invitation to a visit with the king, you would probably have some preconceptions about both the nature of a person who could be a king and the experience of meeting him. Some of you may have thought first about going to Graceland to meet Elvis, but that is not the experience I have in mind here. I’m thinking of a more traditional sort of king. That kind of king likely got to his position either by force of arms or inheritance. Even if he inherited the position, one of his ancestors likely got there by conquest of some sort. You would have to be invited to his presence and be granted an audience just to get in the door. You would go through layers of security, and walk through ornate halls to get to the throne room. And once there, you would be expected to show proper respect and deference or the experience might not turn out well for you. This would be a person to be feared.

That was certainly what the people of Israel had in mind when they were thinking about the promise of the Messiah. They would have been thinking about imagery like this passage from the prophet Jeremiah:

READ Jeremiah 23:1-6

That message was for a people who were being told of the impending end of a long line of kings who had all failed to live up to the example of King David. Within a generation of David's death, the kingdom that he had worked to build had disintegrated, then the Northern Kingdom had been destroyed by the Assyrians after the rule of a succession of kings that were all described as ruling apart from God. The Southern Kingdom – Judah – lasted longer, and had had a few godly kings, but they were falling apart, too, and were about to be conquered by the Babylonians. With that reality literally camped outside the city walls, and after having listened to Jeremiah remind them of the consequences of following ungodly leaders, the people then heard God's promise through Jeremiah of a coming king and a coming kingdom that would eclipse anything the nation had ever experienced. They knew the history lessons about the glory days of the kingdom of Israel under David, and were eager for anything that sounded like a return to those times. It was going to get worse for them before it got better – they were about to experience exile. But in those bad times, they had God's promise of the Messiah to hold on to.

The Babylonians gave way to the Persians, who were conquered by the Greeks under Alexander the Great, who were conquered by the Romans – and the promise of the Messiah continued to be an important anchor for the people. A group of wise men had shown up, looking for a newborn king, and John the Baptist had preached that the kingdom was at hand. Maybe the time was coming when that promised Messiah would come and establish the kingdom again and throw off the oppression of the Romans for good. Jesus had come teaching with authority like they had never heard and performed miracles throughout the country. Maybe he was the one. Maybe he would be Christ the King.

READ Luke 23:32-43

When I was planning these messages from Luke, I did not expect this one to be on Christ the King Sunday. I was actually expecting this Sunday to be the story of Easter and the Resurrection. That would be the story of a triumphal king. So I thought. My mistake was the same as that of the people of the time of Jesus who thought they knew what coming of the Messiah would mean, what the Messiah would be like, and what the kingdom ruled by the Messiah would be. Nobody in the time of Jesus had envisioned a Messiah riding into Jerusalem on a donkey with a parade of children and common people. And there is no way that anybody would have ever pictured Christ the King hanging on a cross. There was no way that this could happen to the Messiah. We just sang a song about a “Glorious Day”. How could there be anything glorious or kingdom-like about a crucifixion?

The answers are in the words of Jesus from the cross.

First, we should see the ultimate example of humility and humble servanthood in Jesus through the whole event of the crucifixion. Humility is expressed in people who put aside self-centeredness and live the truth that life is not about us. Life is not about me. Life is about the place that God has made for me in His kingdom, in His heart. That is demonstrated in the extreme in Jesus. This was not about Him, not about His suffering, not about the agony He endured in that time and on that cross. It was about His place in God’s plan of salvation for His people. It was about what He came to do to free you and me from the burden of sin. He was not focused on His pain and rejection; He was focused on my salvation and your salvation and the salvation of the world.

But what makes this the right passage for Christ the King Sunday is that Jesus did things on that cross that no one but the king could do. In an earthly kingdom or earthly government, only the highest authority in that kingdom or government has the authority to grant pardon to a person convicted of a crime. The people who were responsible for Jesus being crucified had committed a whole rap sheet’s worth of offenses, starting with perjury and false witness and murder. But Jesus, perfectly One with God the Father, forgave them. They heard Him say that, but Scripture does not tell us that any of them responded in any way to that offer of forgiveness. Of the Gospel writers, only Luke

records this, which is in keeping with Luke's emphasis on the outreach of Jesus to the lost and outcast and disadvantaged and marginalized. Jesus, friend of sinners, reaches out with outstretched arms to forgive those who rejected Him... and to offer forgiveness to us who still reject Him when we succumb to our self-centeredness and choose our ways over God's ways.

In an earthly kingdom, only the king has the authority to grant time in the presence of the king. I was reminded here of the story of Esther. She had a plan to save her people, but it required the cooperation of the king. Even though she was queen, she still had to wait for the king to call her into the king's presence before she could put her plan into motion. But here on the cross, Jesus grants the penitent thief access to the throne. Not later. Not at some undetermined future time. Today.

Of all the people in this story, only this thief recognizes Jesus as the king. Others mocked Jesus with the title, or challenged Him to prove that He was the king by performing yet another miracle. But the thief recognized two critically important truths about Jesus: Jesus was the king and His kingdom was not of this world. He did not ask for the wealth or status that a person might request of an earthly king; he just asked to be remembered. This man becomes the model for us in claiming our salvation, following exactly the path to salvation, to right relationship with God, that is expressed again and again in Scripture: acknowledge our status as sinners, and turn to God in faith with repentant hearts, and accept God as Lord and King. The one true King hears him, and of his unmeasurable love and grace receives him into the kingdom.

The one true King hears you, and of His unmeasurable love and grace offers to receive you into His kingdom, a kingdom not of this world, a kingdom like no other. Not later. Not at some undetermined future time. Today. Now. Christ the King, with the power and authority of none other than Almighty God, One with the Holy Spirit, living and reigning, is holding your place for you in His kingdom. Claim your place there, and celebrate your reunion with the King. That is a glorious day.

Amen.