

The Adult Christ

Luke 23:33-43, Christ the King Sunday
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This is a confusing Sunday. It is the Sunday before Thanksgiving which is also the Sunday before Advent begins. In addition, in the Church calendar this Sunday is Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It is a trifecta of celebrations. We sang a thanksgiving hymn as we recognize this week's national holiday. We have announcements about decorating the church for Advent and the Alternative Christmas market so we know Christmas is coming. Celebrating Christ as our King is far down in our consciousness. Admittedly as church events go, Christ the King Sunday usually gets glossed over. It is a new arrival to the church calendar year. In 1925, Pope Pius declared that this Sunday, the Sunday before Advent begins, as Christ the King. He did so in one of his encyclicals post the Great War, WWI, in an effort to dispel the notion that any nation or state has the ultimate reign. He urged Christians to be very clear of who is in charge -- not to sell that militaries or czars, Kaisers, presidents, prime ministers, or kings -- but the ultimate ruler overall is Christ. We are newcomers to holding up this day, we Protestants did not adopt this Sunday as Christ the King until 1970. It was when we adopted the common lectionary that on the last Sunday in the church calendar, our scriptures point us to the ultimate power in our lives and in our world.

This Sunday, this time that we gather, let us consider how we will approach our Advent and Christmas Season. In that preparation, let us look at Christ in his fullness often at Advent. Our focus is on Christ as an infant who needs protecting by others. It is my hope that as we celebrate Christ as King- that we take that with us into the Advent season to not only commemorate a cute little infant born in challenging times but we see Christ as an adult in the fullness of his mission to us. How can we address the impact Christ has as ruler of our lives? God becomes human for our sake. God who conquered death for our sake. God who does not abandon for our sake. Will we sing to the baby Jesus?

Our scripture today is about the Adult Christ. This passage is usually read during Holy week. We are at the apex of the drama. We are at Jesus' execution. It is hardly a seemly place for a King to be, certainly not for a triumphant King. Here is the reading on the final Sunday of the Church liturgical year from Luke 23:33-43:

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

This month Prince Charles of Great Britain turns 71. He has been waiting to be King for about 50 years. I do wonder what the life of Prince Charles is like. In an interview, I heard him answer in princely fashion when asked if he is anxious to become King, "Now one would not wish for the demise of one's mother, would one?" Is being King that royal and that important that there is not much else you can do but wait? That is our earthly image of King, a benevolent person waiting in the wings. Once he arrives as King there will be ceremonies but what else?

It is difficult for us to wrap ourselves around the idea of Kingship particularly when it pertains to Jesus. They called him King of the Jews, at least that was the sign above him when they were killing him. Like this Sunday that takes on different roles in the church's life, Jesus is known to us by different roles. I would suspect that most of us would not use the term King as the first description of Jesus. We see Jesus as our neighbor; Pastor Mary spoke about two weeks ago in her sermon "Won't you be my neighbor?" lifting up the life and work of Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. A neighbor is approachable. Jesus is someone with whom we can talk and who knows what we are going through -- someone safe and a helper. Prince Charles who may someday be King does not seem like a neighbor.

We can relate to Jesus as the ultimate storyteller, as Kevin Kling shared with us last week. Jesus was an excellent listener and he told stories as parables. The images he used were familiar and the message was a new way of approaching God and hearing about God's love and care. Jesus used images like yeast and working for wages, something that most Princes and Kings know only in the abstract.

Jesus as King! Didn't we in our own national history break away from the idea of a King? Jesus is not a king that we have easily reference to in our own lives.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. In the synagogue before he called his disciples in Luke, Jesus says, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to other cities also for I was sent for this purpose." He clearly states his mission to proclaim God's Kingdom! For the next three years he proclaims the goodness of God's kingdom, He tells others to proclaim it as well. Jesus sends out the 12 disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God. At the end of his ministry, at the Last Supper, according to Luke, he tells his disciples to "I confer on to you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom. Throughout Jesus' ministry, God's kingdom was never far from his mind. Jesus references God's Kingdom over 40 times in the Gospel of Luke alone.

People have heard his message including the ones who are trying to stop him. At the point of our Scripture lesson, those people are succeeding. They tack the sign above his broken body. Here your King!! Hey Jesus, you talk about this kingdom, where it's your authority and power now? The thought of Jesus claiming King of the Jews is absurd. The Jews in Roman eyes are next to nothing. The Jews are outnumbered, out powered -- they have no army, and by law cannot carry any weapons, they cannot carry or handle Roman currency. They have no rights and here is this country rabbi, who would be less than nothing taking on the ones of power and influence. How could this broken man even think to go up against such a tested power as Rome. So, the sign "King of the Jews" is placed upon this backwater teacher as a warning. This is what happens when you do not follow the Roman way. This is what happens when a Jew dares to question authority. The priests and scribes know all too well who to support and fall in line with, the Romans. They, too, see it as a lesson for all who dared to follow this teacher. Look what happens when you reach beyond your means -- you are killed in a very public and gruesome way. Look at your teacher, healer hope for the Messiah now, King of the Jews! Look how wrong you were!

The irony is not lost that in this passage, where we think the organized powers are winning, is used for the very opposite purpose to proclaim that no Jesus is not King of the Jews. This man is King over everything! We know the full story. We know that nations and worldly powers are fleeting and they rise and fall. But the victory of Christ remains. We know who is the King.

There are three crosses on the place called the Skull and other figures we have not previously met in Luke. They are criminals also sentenced to death. We do not know their crimes or anything from their past. Their reaction to Jesus's death mirrors the reaction to humanity throughout time. Both see the absurdity of Jesus being executed alongside but in very different ways. One criminal joins in the derision. Where is your kingdom now? Look at this guy. He says he is the Savior. Well save yourself and as an act of good, save us as well. And the other, as absurd as it sounds, he reaches out to Jesus and says do not forget me. Remember me in your Kingdom. That criminal is not sure what

that all means but he is willing to, in his last breaths, to take the leap and recognize Jesus in a kingdom greater than what currently their fate.

There on the cross Jesus's kingdom is affirmed. His mission and purpose have found ears who will hear.

My hope that in this season of twinkling lights and good cheer, in this season when we sing lullabies to the sweet baby Jesus, we also know the adult Jesus. The infant child who grows in to a purpose and mission -- whose goal is to share the good news of God's kingdom. For it is not a baby who we worship this day; it is not an infant that we adore. It is the man who came with a message about God's Kingdom and was crucified for it under the inscription of King of Jews but was so much more. Like Prince Charles, it may take us a lifetime to know and understand Jesus. It may take us a lifetime to fully grasp what it means to have Christ reign in our life and world. But also, like the unnamed criminal, receiving the consequences to his actions. We can reach out to Jesus and say "remember me, in your kingdom."

Christ's reign is here. Thanks be to God. Amen.