

Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Canticle 16  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 23:33-43

Christ The King C  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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### Love Is King

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the very last Sunday of the church year, the Sunday we turn away from ordinary time – which is the season we’ve been in since Pentecost - and turn toward Advent. It’s a pause between liturgical seasons, and in that pause, we’re given the opportunity to reflect on the reign of Christ in our lives and in the world.

Christ the King Sunday was the invention of Pope Pius XI, who created this celebration in 1925, because he wanted to counter the notion that the earthly rulers who fought it out and even “won” the Great War, were in charge. Pius wanted to counter the dread, the violence and the reign of evil people had experienced in the Great War and its aftermath. He wanted people to have an outward and visible sign that the future belonged to goodness, to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to the kingdom of God, not to the kingdom of European Allies or the US of A. He wanted us to remember that dominion belongs to Christ, and nothing else.

So, being Christ the King Sunday, you might think we’d hear some slightly more majestic scripture readings. But no. Instead of hearing about Jesus enthroned in the heavenly realms, we hear of his crucifixion, and as paradoxical as that seems, it’s actually a pretty good picture of what kingship looks like in the Kingdom of God. Still, it’s hard to make sense of why, just when we’re turning toward all the watching and waiting and expectation and wonder of Advent and the birth of sweet baby Jesus, why now must we hear of his suffering and death? The timing of this story doesn’t seem to make sense. Except that it’s Christ the King Sunday, and that Jesus, in his crucifixion, gives us a stunningly clear picture of kingship in God’s upside-down kingdom. The crucified one is, as we hear in the letter to the Colossians the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers... Yes, Jesus, dying on a cross, rules over thrones and dominions and rulers and powers. But how can that be? How can it be that in dying, Christ rules over all? Perhaps a closer look at what was happening that day, will offer us some insight.

It's important to notice the very few and very poignant words Jesus speaks in this gospel passage. Here we are at the scene of the crucifixion with mocking soldiers, jeering crowds, and everyone yelling “Crucify him!” You’ll remember that Pilate had not wanted to crucify Jesus and three times over tried to convince the crowd that Jesus had done nothing to justify his death. But the crowd was hysterical, as crowds can be, whipped into a frenzy of ugliness and power. “Crucify him,” they cried, “Crucify him!” And crucify him, they did. Jesus was hung on a cross between two criminals who, according to their own words, deserved the punishment they received. There on the cross, the crowd looking on, leaders mocking, soldiers taunting, the people yelling: “You saved others, save yourself. If you really are the Messiah, come down from

there. You're supposed to be the king of the Jews, use your power and authority to save yourself!" Even one of the criminals gets in on it – "If you're the messiah, save yourself, save me!"

But did you notice that in the face of all that yelling, all that mocking, all that chaos and frenzy, Jesus is silent? He doesn't fight back, doesn't respond to his accusers, doesn't defend or assert himself and he surely doesn't "save" himself. He is silent. Until he isn't. When Jesus finally chooses to speak, it isn't to his tormentors or the whipped up crowd. He speaks instead to the criminal who seems to be the only one to recognize the kind of king Jesus really is.

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

This man doesn't ask Jesus to save him, he asks Jesus simply to remember him. So while Jesus never even acknowledged the crazy crowds who were convinced he couldn't be a king because if he really were a king, he would have saved himself – while he didn't respond to them, Jesus did respond to the one person who truly saw him, who recognized him for the king he was. And what did he say? He didn't say "Well done, I'm glad somebody gets it, you are definitely worth saving!" No. He said "truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

You will be with me. I will be with you.

This is our God, the one who promises to be with us no matter what we're going through. God doesn't promise to save us from ourselves, save us from bodies that wear out, save us from heartbreak and heartache, save us from hurting people, save us from suffering. What our God promises, is to be with us no matter how hard life becomes. What our God promises is that God will never, ever abandon us. Today you will be with me... I will be with you. That's not just in eternal life, that's today in the here and now life too.

I think sometimes that feels disappointing. We want God to save us from suffering, of course we do. I think that's what the crowds who were yelling at Jesus actually wanted too. Because if he could save himself from suffering, he could save them from suffering too. But Jesus didn't play the God card, didn't float himself down from the cross, didn't shoot lightning bolts at his tormentors, didn't perform for the crowds. He did exactly what you and I have to do when we're hurting. He stayed. He stayed and experienced all the pain, all the suffering and even death, just like all of us will do.

Today I will be with you... today you will be with me. That's what our God promises.

So what does it really mean to say that Christ is our King, if kingship is about relationship, suffering, sacrificial love? What does it mean for us to be followers of the king who says the last shall be first, the kingdom belongs to the poor, we're supposed to bless rather than curse our enemies and all manner of other things that insist we are not at the front of the line or the top of the heap, and that those are not places we should long to be? What does it mean to say that Christ is our King when the King's command is to love God first and to love our neighbor as though our neighbor were ourself because we really all are that connected? And what would it

mean to submit to that rule in our own lives? What would happen if we really believed, if we lived as though Jesus, and his law of love-as-action, had complete lordship over our lives? What would it mean to say thy kingdom come, thy will be done... in me?

Submission and lordship are hard words for us because we are accustomed to the independent lives of the privileged people we are. We may talk about Christ being the ruler, the king of our lives, but truly, we'd rather do what we want. It's pretty easy to be lulled into giving our time and talent and money to the things we think advance our lives, whatever that means, rather than actively discerning what God is calling out of us. Advancing ourselves can seem to be working, as long as the illusion that we are in control holds. But when life comes apart – when we get a devastating diagnosis, lose a partner or a job or a friendship or when any of the myriad things that can go wrong, go wrong... when our lives come apart, that illusion of control shows itself for what it really is. An illusion. And when that happens, we likely wish we had spent more time listening for the still, small voice of God. When things fall apart, we'd give our kingdom for God to reign in our lives.

Letting Christ reign in our lives in hard times and in good times, giving over to a God who was crucified between two common criminals, a God who seemed to lose the sparring match with Pilate, a God who refused to repay violence with violence, doesn't make sense in our world. And at the same time, it is the only thing that makes sense for me. In living and dying the way he did, Jesus sought the complete and total transformation of the world. And his way of transforming the world, was by loving it. Not by controlling it or powering over it or manipulating it with magic miracles. But by loving it. And loving – not controlling or powering over or expecting magic miracles, is how we will make Christ the King in our own lives. Amen.