

Luke 23:33-43 – Christ the King Sunday

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the day where we claim, remember, and celebrate that Jesus is the true king, the one and ultimate authority and sovereign over all things in the universe. This is an important Sunday, one that caps off our Church calendar year, a reminder that all in all the scriptures we've read over the past year, all the many things happening in the world around us and on the news, all things we've personally experienced and shared, struggled with and triumphed over can only be looked at through the lens of Christ's ultimate kingship and power.

It's always struck me, though, that on Christ the King Sunday, this is the Gospel reading we hear. This is the Gospel reading our lectionary gives us? On a day when we focus on Jesus's kingship, on his authority and power over all things, why do we hear the story of the moment in Jesus's life when he seems to be the most vulnerable, the least powerful, the lowest, darkest moment in his life and ministry, maybe the lowest, darkest moment in all of human history?

It is a strange and striking reading for a Sunday that supposedly focuses on Jesus as the one, true ruler of all things. Imagine you were tasked with telling someone about Jesus, especially a moment from the story of Jesus's life and ministry that portrays him as king. What would you pick? Perhaps you would choose a moment from early in Jesus's life, when three other kings travel from far away to kneel at the feet of the infant Jesus, to proclaim him king and present him and his family with fine gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Or perhaps you would choose a moment from Jesus's ministry in which his power is most fully and keenly displayed, maybe that strange and miraculous moment on the sea of Galilee when Jesus calms the storm and the raging sea, where Jesus shows such authority that even the weather and the

elements obey him. Or maybe you would choose any number of stories in which Jesus is rushed by crowds eager to hear his wisdom, be healed, or even just touch the hem of his robe. Or maybe you would choose a moment from just days before our current Gospel reading, when Jesus triumphantly enters in to the city of Jerusalem, where people come from far and wide to see Jesus, to sing songs of praise in his name, to wave palm branches and spread their cloaks on the ground so that even the donkey Jesus rides on doesn't have to touch the dirt.

Yes, any, *all* of these readings might seem to be a better fit for the theme of this Sunday than the reading that we get instead, this image of the suffering, dying Jesus hanging on a cross, powerless, lonely, scoffed at by leaders, mocked by soldiers, and derided and insulted by criminals. Surely this is not the picture of the king we want to leave in the minds of those coming to the gospels looking for a powerful God who we claim has authority and sovereignty over everything.

But, as is so often the case, with God things are never quite what they seem. Our God has always been a God of contradictions, of paradoxes, of reversals. Our God has always brought good things up out of bad things, even and especially out of the worst things humans can do. This moment from our Gospel reading, this dark day of hate and sin and death, even out of this day, God causes light to shine, and, as John will tell us in the beginning of his Gospel, through hate has tried so, so hard, darkness has not and cannot prevail against that light. In this moment where Jesus seems his most vulnerable, his most defeated, this is the moment where Jesus' kingship shines the brightest, the moment where all things are finally and fully redeemed and brought under the authority of Jesus. This is the moment where God's kingdom on earth finally begins to blossom again.

Christ the King Sunday was born out of an attempt to remind the Church, and hopefully by extension the world, that there is something, someone bigger than us, someone we can turn to when the rulers and powers of this world inevitably disappoint, harm, or degrade us. One hundred years ago, after WWI, with nationalism and authoritarianism rising throughout the world, the Church sought to provide a counter, a reminder that only Jesus can be the true leader, the true authority, that inevitably the things we create and invest in will corrupt, will rot, will tarnish. Salvation then, salvation *now*, will not be found in any political slogan, party, or leader, but instead can and will only come from God. Though this is one of the newest feast days in the global Church, it is a timeless reminder, one needed in all places and times. No matter what movement or earthly powers arise, no matter who boasts and brags and claims to be our one true, means of purpose and power and salvation, our ultimate trust, our ultimate hope must rest with God, not with ourselves, not with the powers of this world, not with any vain, temporary, corruptible thing in this world.

And this is good news, this is *the* Good News, that we don't have to do this all on our own, that we don't have to be our own sole means of purpose, hope, and redemption, that we are loved and cared for and sought out, that God has given us the gift of salvation and grace, not because we've earned it or deserve it, but just because God made us, called us good all those many years ago, and has continued to love us and seek us even as we've gone astray and grieved God and ourselves.

It is good news that God's idea of kingship is so very different from our own. Just a cursory glance at the news or over human history will show, in tragic and extensive detail, all the ways that human rulers have fallen short, all the ways that earthly kingdoms have disappointed

or outright harmed us and our brothers and sisters. Though power tends to distort and corrupt humanity, Jesus, who holds ultimate power, could not be corrupted. In in this his most terrible moments, he remained steadfast in his mission, true to himself and his values. Jesus, who has preached forgiveness throughout his entire ministry, forgives those responsible for his death as he hangs on the cross. And when the repentant criminal dying with Jesus asks to be remembered, Jesus offers him a place in paradise that very day, grace upon grace upon grace. Even in his darkest moment, even as he is scoffed at, and mocked, and derided, Jesus chooses to forgive, to bless, and to welcome and redeem.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we remember God's penchant for paradox, God's ability to make good things come from even the worst thing. As is so often the case with God, the entire imagery of royalty is subverted in Jesus's final hours. Instead of a crown of gold, Jesus is given a crown of thorns. Instead of a purple robe, Jesus's clothes are gambled away. Instead of a throne, Jesus rules from the hardwood of the cross. This is God's biggest and best reversal, God's fullest and most complete inversion of expectations. *This* is a true king, not waging war and death, but conquering it. This is a true king, not vengeful and angry, but forgiving and reconciling. This is a true king, not wielding power to oppress others, but using power to free others from oppression. This is a true king, a person who refuses to meet cruelty with more cruelty, hate with more hate, darkness with more darkness. This is a true king, not saving the best for the self, but giving up the self for the sake of all.