

Christ the King C 2025 Luke 23:33-43

If, when I read this morning's gospel, you flipped to the front of the bulletin to make sure it said "Christ the King Sunday" and that I wasn't reading for Good Friday, I don't blame you. Whether your mental image of a king comes from the Netflix series *The Crown* or the new PBS documentary on the American Revolution or *Game of Thrones*, the crucifixion is probably the last thing we think of when we think of a king, even Christ the King. Many branches of the Christian tree subscribe to what we call a theology of glory: in that framework, the crucifixion was a single necessary sacrifice for the atonement of believers, but now Christ reigns supreme, and therefore people can tell how godly they are by their worldly blessings of health, wealth, and power. However, we Lutherans follow the theology of the cross which claims that instead of being an aberration or anomaly, the crucifixion reveals the true nature of God's selfless love and absolute rejection of violence, even in defense or reaction to a world that is hell-bent on violence, vengeance, and domination. The cross wasn't a temporary embarrassment that Jesus had to endure in order to one day become like all the kings of human nations; the cross is the revelation of Christ as King of *God's* everlasting kingdom.

Human beings have an absolutely appalling capacity for inflicting cruelty on others, especially when they think they are powerful enough to be protected from suffering themselves. The Roman Empire held absolute authority in Jesus' day, so Rome could subject people to the horrors of crucifixion without worrying about retribution. In fact, crucifixion fed the cycle of oppression by terrifying onlookers into submission; it was not only physically excruciating but a public humiliation meant to discourage others from breaking the law. Of course, it's worth questioning the legitimacy of the justice system that found those people guilty of breaking the law; even one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus had the wherewithal to protest that Jesus had done nothing wrong. Luke doesn't specify what crimes the men to the right and left of Jesus committed that led to their public executions; we might wonder what they could have possibly done to "deserve" that kind of death, even though that's how one of them described their situation. In the two thousand years since Jesus' crucifixion, the methods may have changed but state-sponsored terrorism is still alive and well, as is some people's tolerance for it—as long as they think it will never be directed at them.

The leaders who scoff at Jesus, the soldiers who mock him, the criminal who derides him, and even the inscription over him that reads *This is the King of the Jews*—all dripping with sarcasm—show a misunderstanding of who Jesus, God incarnate, really is and by extension, a misunderstanding of who God really is. All throughout the gospels, Jesus confounds the expectations of those who are waiting for the Messiah to act like a triumphant military or political leader, rescuing Israel through victory and force. How could Jesus be the King of the

Jews if he doesn't save Israel from Roman occupation? How could Jesus be the Messiah if, instead of exercising supernatural power to save himself, he submits to death on a cross? Who wants a leader who won't fight back? Neither in life nor in death did Jesus act the way the people expected a king or certainly God's Messiah to act. Surely the one who represented God's will on earth would simply crush all human opposition to rule the earth in God's name.

With two millennia of hindsight and Christian doctrine and dogma, we understand that Jesus didn't die on the cross because he was incapable of saving himself, as the onlookers at the crucifixion implied, and that the kingdom over which Christ rules is infinite—not limited by time or space to first century Judea. But the temptation is still for us to see the crucifixion as incompatible with the image of Christ as King. We don't want to see the cross as the predictable consequence of Jesus' obedience to God's will in a world that is utterly opposed to doing things God's way. Because what might happen to *us* if that's how this world treats those who strive to follow God as Jesus did? We don't want to find Jesus in the middle of human injustice, suffering along with those who suffer. Because what does that call *us* to do when we see or even are complicit in the unjust suffering of others? Even in our art and architecture, we Protestants especially want to skip right past the crucifixion to get to the resurrection: notice our crosses, empty of the crucified Christ.

We're tempted to think that Jesus was not king when he was on the cross but only became king when he was no longer suffering—or to think that he will only really be king when he comes back with armies and guns and tanks, because that's how *we* expect victory to happen. We think now that that unfortunate crucifixion episode is over, Jesus can get on with acting the way *we* think kings should act: demanding allegiance by whatever force is necessary or expedient, ignoring the cries of the oppressed, silencing dissent, exploiting the land, resources, and people, and wiping enemies off the face of the earth. We can't fathom how the selfless, gentle, non-coercive love of God could possibly conquer the evils of this world, so we wait for Jesus to start acting the way human leaders have always acted throughout history—just somehow on *our* side this time. If that's what we're waiting for, we'll be waiting a long time.

This year is the one hundredth anniversary of Christ the King Sunday, instituted by Pope Pious XI in defiance of the authoritarianism and nationalism that would eventually take Europe into the Second World War. In January, I'll be attending a conference addressing the heresy we now call *Christian Nationalism*, because people are *still* trying to rebrand Jesus in the image of human rulers instead of seeing what the gospels so clearly showed us: When Jesus could have turned the world to his side by force, he instead turned the world upside down by his love. *That* is the king we claim to follow, the one whose crown is revealed by his love on the cross. May the Lord make us faithful subjects of the One who is forever faithful to us.