

Jeremiah 23:1-6  
 Luke 23:33-43

Christ the King Sunday  
 Midway Presbyterian Church  
 November 20, 2022

## **We Have a King**

### *The Old Testament Lesson*

Just as God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt, in our Old Testament Lesson this morning we hear that God will save them again—this time from exile in Babylon. They will know a king who is wise and just. Listen to these words from the prophet Jeremiah, Chapter 23, verses 1-6...

### *The Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today from the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke, we read of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross, and his last words to another human before he died. Listen to these words from verses 33-43 of Luke 23...

### *Sermon*

Over three hundred years ago, Spaniards besieged the small French town of St. Quentin. The city walls were in ruins; fever and famine plagued the people. One day the Spaniards shot over the walls an arrow to which they had attached a slip of parchment promising that if the townspeople surrendered, their lives and property would be spared. Well, the mayor of the town was a devout Huguenot. And for answer, he tied a piece of parchment to a javelin and hurled it back at the Spaniards. On the parchment was a message: "*Regem habemus,*" or "*We have a king!*"

Well, we Christians too have a King. Paul says in the first chapter of his letter to the church in Colossiae, God

has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. (1:13)

What kind of King is Jesus and what does his kingship mean for us today? These are questions we want to consider this morning as we follow part of Luke's chronicle of the crucifixion of Christ.

He has already recorded the political charges against Jesus at the beginning of chapter 23:

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' (1-2)

The hearings before Pilate and Herod exonerate Jesus of the accusations, but the crowd demands his crucifixion. So Barabbas, a prisoner and insurrectionist against Roman power, is released instead of Jesus. And Jesus is led away to be crucified.

What Luke teaches us is that Jesus is truly the Messiah, the anointed one of God, who paradoxically through *crucifixion*, enters his eternal reign.

When 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. (23:33)

The climax of Jesus' suffering has been reached; the power of darkness has closed in against him. And he won't be merely put to death, but put to death on a cross between two criminals. Remember James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who wanted to sit, one at Jesus' right hand and one at his left, in his glory? Well, here two criminals hang at his right and at his left in his hour of crucifixion and death. Crucifixion between two criminals is the first of three examples of public mockery of this "King" of the Jews.

Then comes Jesus' prayer:

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. (34a)

Therein does Jesus echo a theme of his ministry—forgiveness—as in the Lord's Prayer, he taught us to pray for forgiveness, as we forgive others.

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. (34b)

Gambling for the prisoner's garments would be especially humiliating to the helpless sufferer.

Then in verse 35 of our text we read:

And 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!"

According to Luke, it is not the people who are mocking, it is the leaders. "You saved others, can't you save yourself?" This is said to the one who taught,

For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. (Luke 9:24)

The words of the scoffers ironically pose the paradox of his kingly mission—Jesus is the Messiah who saves others only by not saving himself.

In our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah we read that in contrast to so-called "shepherds" of the people who used their power to scatter the people rather than protect them, God would one day raise up a "righteous Branch," whose kingship will be characterized by wisdom, justice, and safety. The exercise of kingly power, then, will be on behalf of God's people, rather than over against them.

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." (36-38)

Soldiers now enter the act. And the honorable vocation of soldiery, whose duty is to maintain security and protect the innocent against misuse of power, that honorable profession is disgraced by these ignorant buffoons.

Recall that right after Jesus' baptism, in the wilderness of temptation, Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of this world:

All this world will be yours, if you will simply bow down and worship me.

And Jesus answered,

It is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

And the devil told Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle and no harm would come to him.

If you are the Son of God—He will give his angels charge over you, to guard you; they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

And Jesus answered,

It is said, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

Likewise, the soldiers challenge Jesus to demonstrate his kingship by saving himself.

They invite Jesus to verify that inscription on the cross above his head, “This is the King of the Jews.” What they will not see is that Jesus *is* the King of the Jews, his only crime being that he is true to himself—true to God. And so the cross becomes the place of his enthronement.

Now we are prepared for Luke’s climactic picture of the Kingdom:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus replied,

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Notice here that the second criminal addresses Christ the King. Indicating that he has repented and believes, he says:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

*When* you come into your kingdom. When indeed will Jesus begin his reign? The answer Jesus gives in a solemn oath-like Amen, saying,

Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Paradise is a very appropriate word in the context of the story, for its ordinary meaning is “garden” or “park” such as a king would have at his disposal. Sort of a first century White House Rose Garden. To be with the king in his private garden was an indication of singular status.

Who is this that can declare divine pardon? Who is this that, dying on a cross, can exercise executive privilege? Who is this that will not save himself, yet says he will save a criminal for eternity. For Luke the answer is clear—it is Christ the King.

“*Today* you will be with me in Paradise.” So, now is the time when Christ’s reign begins, even in his suffering and dying. Ambrose said, “For life is to be with Christ, because where Christ is, there is the kingdom.”

“Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Jesus’ last words to another human being before his death and resurrection were words of forgiveness, in harmony with the ministry of his short life. And so the One who came to seek and save the lost, does so even in his dying. This One who associated with publicans and sinners, does so even in his death. This is the kind of King he is, bringing the outsider in—into paradise, into the Kingdom, into life with the King.

Surely this story reminds us that it is never too late to turn to Christ. There are other things of which we must say, “The time for that is past. I am grown too old for that now.” But we can never say that of turning to Jesus Christ.

My friends, Christ the King Sunday reminds us that we have a King—that he is a king of love, mercy and truth. The title “King” is accurate but inadequate, for it does not express the abundance of grace that Jesus pours out on all who would be his subjects. Only in his kingdom is there true peace and joy—today and forever.

Yes, Advent and Christmas tell of an infant who is no mere baby but the King of Kings. His reign has begun, and his reign one day will be clear to all. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and he shall reign forever and ever.

I am glad that Luke tells us that our King was crowned on Calvary, not on some golden throne with minions waving peacock feathers. The Lord of the Universe comes from our midst, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. He knows our pain and sorrow. He is well-acquainted with our suffering and grief. And he has been faithful unto death, even death on a cross. Philippians says, for that reason God has highly exalted him and given him the name beyond all other names. (Philippians 2:9-11)

We know that Christ is King of the Church, Lord of lords and King of kings, but is he truly our personal King? Are we today, crowning him Lord of our lives. A pastor was teaching his little girl to sing, “Praise him, praise him, all ye little children, God is love, God is love.” Then, “Serve him, serve him...” Then “Love him, love him...” When he stopped, his daughter said, “Daddy, you forgot to crown him.” Are we, by any chance, in any way, forgetting to crown Christ the King of our life?

What then shall be our response to this King? Mother Teresa once picked up a woman on a Calcutta street who was in a terrible condition. She explained,

I did for her all that my love can do. I put her in bed and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand, as she said just this, “Thank you”—and then she died.

On this week of Thanksgiving, as we stand at the foot of the cross, may we be able to say one thing, “Thank you.”

But not only, “Thank you,” for like the Huguenots, we can say to the world, “*Regem habemus.*” “We have a king.” “I have a King”—Christ the Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.