

WPC  
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What Kind of King is Christ?  
Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year - Christ the King Sunday, when we celebrate Christ's reign, both among us already, and yet to come in all its fullness. On this last day in the church year, it's good to ask, "Who is our king?" If we answer, "Jesus Christ is our King," then we need to realize that leads to the foolishness of the cross rather than the wisdom of the world. It leads to a king who's beaten and crucified, whose only "throne" is a cross. It's not an easy answer to live with.

William Willimon believes that's why we need to gather, on a regular basis, at least once every week, to continually ask the question, "Who is in charge here?" We open up the scriptures, we meditate on the word, we tell stories, we pray, so that we can respond to the question, "Who is king?" with the answer "Jesus Christ is King."

The Feast of Christ the King was created in the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> "In a time when states were asserting their dominance over world affairs, when the world was torn asunder by wars

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Nov. 21, 2010, p. 33.

instigated by totalitarian governments, the church asserted, in Christ the King, that Jesus Christ ruled. In other words, this day is a very ‘political’ Sunday.”<sup>2</sup> It’s tough for many people today to believe that there’s any power greater than that of secular modern governments. On this day, the church asserts that Jesus is not only God, but also that he is King. The direction of world history, the key to what’s going on in the world today, and the place this world is ultimately headed to is all in Christ’s hands. But he’ll do it in his own surprising way. That’s what Christ the King means.

Our New Testament lesson from the Gospel of Luke is usually read on Good Friday, for it includes one of the seven last words of Christ on the cross. But those words also offer us a glimpse into what it means to say that Christ is our King. The image of the suffering and forgiving Christ who was executed as a criminal among criminals has always been difficult for “successful” people to embrace. Yet it is precisely this suffering servant who is the king that we Christians are called to serve.

Let’s take a closer look at our gospel text for this morning. The Romans crucified Jesus with two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. It’s ironic that just one chapter before, a dispute had arisen among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest (22:24).

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<sup>2</sup> Willimon, p. 34.

Matthew and Mark record that the argument was because James and John wanted to sit next to Jesus in his kingdom, one at his right hand and the other at his left. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “The best seat Jesus will get this side of the grave is a throne full of splinters, and when he is hung out on it to dry by the powers that be, it will not be James and John on either side of him but two unnamed bandits, one on his left and the other on his right.”

Beginning at v. 35, did you notice how many times the word "save" is used, and in what context it's used? It's used at least 4 times by different people. It's not surprising that the leaders who hurled their taunts at Jesus while he was on the cross had a difficult, if not impossible, time imagining that their Messiah, their anointed king, would wear a crown of thorns and be executed between two criminals. They expected a king like David, a king who would wear a golden crown.

What is the message at the cross? Verses 35 - 37 are key. According to Anthony Robinson, “There the religious leaders (church) and soldiers (state) taunt Jesus with the words, ‘He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah,’ and ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.’ Jesus is both Messiah and King precisely because he is not in the self-saving business, precisely because he doesn't use his power in his own self-interest, but pours out his power for others and for all. The world thinks of kingly

power as that which exempts and saves from suffering and death. The gospel shows us a different kind of power, a different kind of king and kingly rule, not saving itself but giving itself, not asserting but surrendering, not taking but offering, not ruling over but standing with. Truly, he is the King.”<sup>3</sup>

We find in v. 38 the inscription put over the cross says “This is the King of the Jews” - Jesus was being mocked by the soldiers with this title. Ironic, isn't it, that this is the only official time in the gospels that Jesus was referred to as a King.

Earlier, Jesus had been mocked over and over by the leaders and soldiers, who taunted him with the words "Save yourself," and the one criminal adding "and us." In v. 43 Luke records for us an act of salvation in a situation in which the word "save" has only been used in taunts and ridicule. Jesus reassures the one criminal that he will join him in Paradise. Fred Craddock notes that "here Jesus does save someone, and that the one saved is a dying criminal is completely in keeping with the types of persons blessed by Jesus throughout his ministry."

Before we continue our study of this event as recorded by Luke, I'd like for us to quickly turn backwards to Matthew's account of this same event, found in Matthew 27: 41-44, on p. 33. [READ]

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Robinson, Common Reading, Nov. 15, 2010.

Notice, that v. 44 says, "the bandits," - plural. *Both* of the bandits joined with the crowd in taunting and mocking Jesus in the beginning.

Question: What happened that caused such a radical change in this one bandit's heart? How did he undergo such an amazing transformation from one who had previously joined the crowd and the other bandit in mocking, possibly even blaspheming, Christ, to the only one who at the crucifixion had the courage to stand up for Jesus and the humility to submit to him? How did he, a common criminal, seeing that Jesus was crucified just as he was, perceive that Jesus had a kingdom, that the one who was crucified next to him wearing a crown of thorns was indeed a king?

I believe this bandit was touched and transformed by what Jesus said in v. 34, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." As Ken Giles states, "In the midst of the spears of abuse thrust into Jesus' side, this thief hears him appeal to a court higher than Caesar's. The appeal is not for justice but for mercy. And not mercy for himself but for his accusers. The spears are sharp and relentless, but Jesus does not throw them back. He bears them in his heart."

This bandit, when he looks upon Jesus, sees no hatred, no scorn, no vengeance. What he sees is Jesus absorbing evil; what he sees is forgiveness. It's then that he's hit with the realization that he's face to face

with God. He may not know much, but he does know three things: That Jesus is a king, that his kingdom is not of this world, and that this king has the power to bring even the most unworthy into his kingdom. But that's enough. He senses that this Jesus is able to somehow touch his aching wounds, heal him, and make him whole.

So he rebukes the other bandit who derides Jesus, and then he asks Jesus to *remember* him. There are few human yearnings as powerful as the desire to be remembered. To be remembered means that someone cares for us, that we matter. In the movie "The Breakfast Club," a group of teenagers are serving detention one Saturday, and one of the teens is confessing to another how horrible her home life is because of how her parents mistreat her. When asked what awful thing her parents are doing to her, she replies, "They ignore me."

Have you ever been ignored by someone you care for? To be ignored, forgotten by someone, means that we have little or no worth in that person's eyes. So it is that this bandit on the cross, faced with an ignominious death, probably forsaken by his family and friends, desperately reaches out to Jesus and asks that he be remembered.

In response to his request, the bandit experiences sheer grace. Jesus tells him that he will indeed be remembered, that he will be joining Jesus in

Paradise, that, in essence, his name is written in the book of life. That's like having our pictures in God's wallet. In other words - God loves us, remembers us, and holds us close to his heart.

All of us are unworthy to stand before God, but we are not worthless. God remembers us. In return, we're called to remember Jesus. We remember the death of our Lord and King. And we also remember that he will one day return, in all his glory.

The problem, of course, is that we still live in a sort of in-between time, sometimes called "the now and the not yet". Christ is indeed King, his reign is here among us already, and yet it has not yet come in all its fullness. Willimon says, "Paul's vision of the Christian life is thus of a life lived between D-Day and VE-Day (*landing in Normandy vs. final victory in Europe*). The decisive battle has been won; the battles we face today are part of the mopping-up operation to implement that victory (*in other words, evil can still cause great harm, but not ultimate harm anymore*). In the meantime, we are to live as those who know that the decisive battle has been fought, the war has been won, and we have been liberated to live as those who know for sure who sits on the throne. There is now only one power we

are to obey, in life and death, in life beyond death. That power has a human face, a face once crowned with thorns.”<sup>4</sup>

Even though we’re living in the now and the not yet, we do get glimpses of the age to come, such as the transformation of this thief. For the Kingship of Christ means that the world is overturned: our King wears a crown of thorns and is crucified, while a thief is saved at the last minute.

We see glimpses of the age to come today as well, despite all of the horrible things that are happening in our world. Glimpses of what life could and can be like when we accept the extraordinary and unusual kingship of Christ. Let me share with you one example.

I had a friend at Princeton Seminary named Doug. Doug was from Baltimore, and his father was an activist minister in inner-city Baltimore. Doug and his father were walking in the park one day talking about ministry. His father was sharing some of his discouragement, saying "Sometimes I can barely hang on. I just have to feel that what little I can do is a part of some greater hope that only God can give." When they finished their walk, they went over to a pay telephone to call home and say that they were on their way home, but before they could get to the phone, a man stopped them and asked, "Spare change?"

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<sup>4</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Nov. 25, 2007

Doug's father, in the spirit of the conversation I suppose, reached deep into his pockets, pulled out all the money he had, which turned out to be quite a handful, held it forward to the startled man and said, "Here, take what you need." The man's eyes turned big and, aware that something new was happening, said, "I'll take it all." He took it all and walked away. No sooner had he done that than Doug's father realized, "I was going to make a telephone call here and I just gave away all my change." So he called back to the man, "Sir, excuse me just a minute, I wonder if I might have back one quarter so I can use the payphone." The man, himself still in the spirit of this extraordinary exchange, held out his hands and said, "Here, take what you need."

Amazing things happen when we accept the rule of Christ in the present, and when we catch a vision of all that the reign of Christ can be in the future. Just as Christ remembered the thief on the cross, Christ remembers us, loves us, and calls us to pay attention to one another - not just to the surfaces: this one's a thief, that one's a bum, but to look deeper, to reach out to one another's deepest need.

Jesus, hanging on the cross, could have said to that thief : "Hey, buddy, give me a break. This is not the best time to ask for a handout." But

what he said, in essence, was "here, take what you need." Thanks be to God for his amazing grace. Amen.