

**Luke 23:33-43 (NRSV)**

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. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 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!" 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."

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

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is "Christ the King" Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. This is the Sunday where we consider Jesus Christ, the judge of history.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about Christ the King Sunday while describing the National Cathedral in the District. "Perched on the highest hill in town, it is like something out of a dream, with towers so tall they seem part of the sky, adorned with all kinds of scrollwork, fancy finials, and wild looking gargoyles ... To enter the cathedral is to enter a sacred cave, filled with whispers and footsteps, ... To see the high altar you have to travel past all the monuments of the faith, past all the monuments to

human achievement and long-gone saints, ... only after you have taken that walk do you arrive at the high altar, where Jesus sits on his throne at the end of time, surrounded by the whole company of heaven as he balances the round earth on the palm of his hand like a ripe fruit. It is Christ the king, preparing to judge the world, preparing to evaluate everything that has happened since all things came to be, and that is the brilliance of that cathedral space. Even the most casual tourist enters through the doorway of creation and winds up at the altar of the last judgment, moving from the beginning of time to the end, to stand before the One who will sort out everything that has happened in between. That is where we stand every year on the last Sunday of the Christian year, the Feast of Christ the King.

Today's Gospel reading, however, offers no majestic picture of Christ the King. In fact, Jesus could scarcely be less kingly. He is hanging from a cross, between two criminals. The crowd of common people is silent, but the leaders, the soldiers and even the criminals are not. All of them, the leaders, the soldiers, one of the two criminals, are mocking Jesus, telling him if he is such a big deal king, why can't he save himself. They do not imagine that he doesn't want to save himself – they've never seen a king like this one.

What kind of a king is this? This is the question the first criminal is asking, the question the leaders and the soldiers are asking. What kind of king is this? If we are honest, we should be asking the same question ourselves.

The first thing that stands out is that this is a king of self-sacrificing love. Kings down through history have had no trouble sending their followers out to die. This is the first King to die for his followers. He prays that his father would forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing. And indeed they don't – if Jesus saved himself, as they keep telling him to, who would save *them*?

A second trait of this king stands out – this is a king of trust. He trusts his father that this sacrifice is necessary. But even more amazingly, he trusts his disciples that they will carry on in his absence. This trust, on the face of it, is astonishingly naïve. Where are his disciples? They are all in hiding, they have fled. Yet Jesus trusts that in time, with the infusion of the Holy Spirit, they will carry on his work. Think about this a second – there is no plan B. It will be the disciples or no one.

Now, admit it. If you were the son or daughter of God, if you had armies of angels, power without measure at your disposal and you wanted to change the world for the better, is this the way you would do it? With 12 feckless fishermen, tax collectors and other assorted nobodies. No. Me neither. This plan has only one thing going for it. It worked. It actually worked.

This is also the king of generosity and hospitality. He welcomed everyone. He welcomed children, who were the weakest and smallest of creatures. He welcomed women, even women others in this culture would not welcome. He welcomed cripples and lepers. He welcomed rich people, too, but he encouraged them to leave their money at the door. He welcomed everyone, he fed everyone, he talked with everyone.

A teacher king. Everywhere he goes he is teaching. And he teaches the strangest ways. He doesn't lecture, usually. He doesn't provide information. He doesn't give rules or formulas, usually. No, he tells stories and he asks questions. He tells stories about fathers and sons, landlords and tenants, vineyard owners and workers, about mustard seeds and growing things. And these questions ask us to see things differently, to see everyday things the way God might see them.

A healer king. Everywhere he goes he heals people. People with awful diseases, people possessed by demons, people who are

crippled or lame or lepers. People with disfigured faces and disfigured souls.

And he was the king of truth. He told people the truth about what they were doing, how they were falling short, how they needed to change to become the people God wanted them to be. He told them to rely on God and not on the things of the world. He told them to care for others and that God would care for them. He told them that money was dangerous. He told them that what was really important boiled down to two things – to love God and to love our neighbors the way we do ourselves.

These are truths that the world doesn't want us to believe. When the Reign of God really does begin, the first casualty will be the world economy. Oh, we'll still need food and clothing, though high fashion will take a hit. We'll consider the lilies of the field and I suspect dressing down and casual Fridays will be the order of the day.

Let's see, the king of self-sacrificing love, the king of trust, of generosity and hospitality, of teaching and of healing, the king of truth. This doesn't sound like the kings we are used to. Why don't we have rulers like this one? Why are our kings so different?

Well, first, let's be fair, he was very special. One of a kind. But that is true in a couple of senses. Jesus was unique among world religious leaders – he was executed. Buddha died peacefully at the age of 80, surrounded by his followers. Confucius died an old man, too. Muhammad died in the arms of his favorite wife. But Jesus was executed at the age of 33 and it's hard to believe that a man who just walked around preaching about love would get the crowd and the empire mad enough to crucify him.

And maybe that's the most important thing – can it be that our rulers are not like Christ the King because we don't really *want* rulers like Christ the King. Do we want rulers who would trust us and expect us to trust each other, rulers who would love us and expect us to love each other, rulers who would welcome anyone, including people we wouldn't welcome? Would we want rulers who would teach and heal and expect us to teach and heal each other, too? What we would do with rulers who would tell us the truth and expect us to tell the truth even when the truth is painful?

The hardest question to ask this morning is not what kind of king this Jesus is, but rather what kind of king do we want? Every Sunday, and for most of us more often than that, we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. If that were so, if we really followed the king that we really have, then imagine what kind of a people we might be. A trusting people, a loving people, a generous and welcoming people, a teaching and healing people, a truthful people. And wouldn't that be something!

Amen.