



Lectionary 34, Year C

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Christ the King Sunday: Gospel Text – Luke 23:33-43*

Luke 21:5-19

³³ 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. ³⁴ [[Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ 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!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

SERMON TEXT:

So here we are at the end of November and it's Christ the King Sunday! How special is that? Most of us are smartly into the holiday spirit with Thanksgiving and Christmas right around the corner. In fact, next week is the beginning of Advent, the start of the new Church year. And today's celebration is CHRIST THE KING Sunday. That kinda makes sense...Let's celebrate the ending of the year in style and celebration of the King who reigns, Christ Jesus our Lord! And yet, today's Gospel reading takes us back not to an easy story of glory and power, but to the mockery and devastation of the crucifixion! It seems a bit strange that on the last Sunday of the church year we are again watching Jesus on the cross. For most of us, enduring the Good Friday story once a year is enough. Or is it?

What does your minds-eye conjure up when you hear the story of Jesus on the cross? What feelings does it bring up in you when you hear how the people treated Jesus during his crucifixion? They "cast lots to divide his clothing", the leaders scoffed and the soldiers mocked him, and the one criminal crucified beside him derides him ever so viciously. What do you feel when you watch Jesus die?

For me, feelings of anguish, embarrassment, fear, anger, a deep sense of unfairness, betrayal, and angst arise inside. The serious injustice and violence of it all is heart-wrenching. Those are not

the feelings and emotions I would normally or gladly associate with "Christ the King" or connect with God coming to us in all "God's glory"! And yet, that is the story we hear today. Why? Take a breath with me. Take a moment. Now I want you to think about a time when you were the recipient of a big surprise. It could be a wonderful memory of when you were a child and opened an amazing Christmas gift; or as an adult you got an unexpected raise or promotion at work. Or it could be a surprise that doesn't necessarily invoke happy thoughts...your surprise might have been a diagnosis that changed the course of your life; or you suddenly lost a friend or loved one...because of course, not every surprise is a happy one. But take a moment and think about what a surprise does to us and for us? Surprises shock us, amaze us, startle or stun us, sometimes they stop us in our tracks, they may force us to do something we weren't prepared for, and very often they cause us to change.

In today's Gospel story Jesus is on the cross, our glorious and powerful God's Son is being mocked, Christ the King looks like he's losing the battle and evil is winning. And then, at this most critical juncture in human history, the most powerful, unexpected surprise changes the life of the criminal hanging besides Jesus, this surprise changes the course of history and even our reality. Think back to how Jesus responds to the injustice and violence he is experiencing on the cross...Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He does not scoff, mock, or deride. He does not judge or condemn them. He does

not retaliate or seek revenge. He doesn't call them names, yell or cuss at them. He doesn't express anger. He neither speaks nor acts with violence. In fact, Jesus chooses to suffer the most painful death for us, and experience a violence coursed with this deep injustice rather than be their cause. Jesus shows God's most powerful gift of love and forgives them. Talk about a surprise!!! Talk about a God-sized surprise that causes significant change, that even changes the course of a life. One statement of faith and that criminal's reality is changed in an instant. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." For you see, when Jesus speaks God's love and mercy in the face of hard stuff, God's power and hope reign eternal and reality is changed, there is Christ the King. Jesus shows us how radically trusting God's way and God's vision for all humanity brings new possibility, brings a new reality, there is Christ the King. Death is real but Love and Mercy are greater; there is Christ the King. Love, mercy, and forgiveness change the course of possibility; evil doesn't win, God's way transforms it all. Now that's a surprise to hang on to.

It's that surprise and amazing gift of love, kindness and mercy lived out and shown by Jesus in so many instances, that if we, as his disciples, take it seriously, can influence our choices as we live our lives in the face of challenges. There's the woman at the well, met by Jesus at an everyday location - changed forever;

Zaccheus, met by Jesus up in a tree, shown mercy and understanding, changed forever; Lazurus was dead! He was met

by Jesus in the tomb, changed forever through love and mercy. What does this mean for us as followers of Jesus in a world that is not always easy to understand. There's no doubt we are living in a world with growing discord and division, with intensifying realities of injustice that raise feelings of disbelief, angst and betrayal. We're in a socio-political climate where one can't know where the real truth lies, this mockery of truth is brutal, the injustice of hurt is real - on so many levels - families are divided, friends no longer talk, communities are torn apart, fear seems to be reigning. Where is Christ the King in all of that?

Dear friends, Jesus is still surprising us - yes, through love and forgiveness for us as individuals, but also urging and empowering us to act and respond in surprising ways as well! If we take seriously this Creator God, who gave his Son to redeem us and continually shows up, as promised, in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit...if we take that faith seriously, then God's promise is that when we act in love, mercy and forgiveness, especially when it is hardest for us, with the people we really don't want to engage with, we and others are changed forever. In those very situations, God's love, God's hope, God's vision reigns among us. Jesus, Christ the King, teaches us a way of life and shows us behaviors that reflect love, mercy, forgiveness, welcome, and kindness that change the world for the better. Is it easy? No. As Martin Luther King, Jr said "Living the way of love requires cosmic company". But friends, because of Jesus we are gifted that cosmic, divine company for living of our days.

I will leave you with this blessing: May you be made strong in God's love, forgiveness and mercy with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, so that you may mercifully act in love, forgiveness and kindness with others, even those you most disagree with, joyfully giving thanks to God our Creating Father, who through the redeeming life, death, resurrection and ultimate act of love of Jesus, enables us through God the Holy Spirit to experience God's holy power even in the hardest of times and the darkest of hours, and to share in the inheritance of all the saints in the light. Always friends, faithfully expect to be surprised; Christ the King reigns.

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