

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga  
November , 2022  
Year C, Last Pentecost, Proper 29  
*Christ the King*  
The Rev. Leyla King

Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Canticle 16  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 23:33-43

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

Today is the last Sunday of the Church year, a day dedicated to the celebration of the universal rule of God in Christ the King. Today, we remember Christ's primacy over all principalities and powers and we re-ascribe our allegiance to our divine monarch over all those other powers that vie for our loyalty – whether they be external realities like nations or internal drives like the desire for wealth. Today, we recognize Christ as “the head of the body,” “the beginning,” the “first place in everything,” as the writer of Colossians puts it. And we are reminded that, through Christ, our whole selves belong, first and foremost, to the kingdom of God.

Some these days shy away from that language of kingdoms and kingship. For them, it rings a little too much of colonialism, empire and patriarchy.

But, of course, that's not the kind of monarch we have in Christ Jesus. Indeed, our scriptures show us, again and again, that Christ's reign is entirely unlike that of any earthly monarch. Scripture insists that Christ the King does not follow human patterns of rule, will not fit our expectations of kingship and won't be molded to our desires of our own personal sovereign.

And in many ways, that's good news for us. As the portion of Jeremiah we heard reminds us, human kings are fallible and corruptible. And we know that it's not just kings. No matter your political persuasion, we have all seen how presidents and prime ministers and emperors, rulers and lawmakers of all types, throughout history and in our present day, so often put their own desire to grasp or maintain power before the good of the people they are meant to rule and serve.

It is a story that seems as old as the hills. And certainly as ancient as the prophet Jeremiah's time, when the kings of Israel and Judah, instead of using their power properly, used it to “destroy and scatter” the people of their kingdoms. The picture that Jeremiah paints of these false kings is a reminder of everything that Christ the true King is *not* and surely it is good news that Jesus's reign does not follow that pattern of human kingship.

But, perhaps it's also true that sometimes, the reign of Christ the King doesn't *feel* like good news to us, at least not good for us specifically, for my own set of desires and needs. If Christ the King will not be corrupted by the human lust for power, neither will he be molded to particular-to-me wants.

It'd be really nice to have all the wealth in the world, for example, but pray as I might, Christ the King is not some Santa Claus or genie who will make that wish come true. And, *of course*, we wouldn't pray to win the lottery – because we're not that greedy – and we wouldn't expect to get it – because we're not that foolish.

But, then again, sometimes we do expect our wishes to be granted by this divine King – When we pray for the cancer to miraculously disappear from the body of one so dear. When we pray that my

job remains when colleagues are being laid off, so that the family will be provided for. When we pray for *that* candidate to win the election because it is *so clear* that she is the one who will serve the people best. These are much more high-minded desires than winning the lottery, but what happens when Christ our King doesn't fulfill them in the ways we might expect? Do we still see the good news of Christ's reign even then?

In an essay<sup>1</sup> on a portion of Luke's narrative of the crucifixion, author Debie Thomas argues that the two criminals who are crucified alongside Jesus are very likely revolutionaries who, like Jesus, posed some kind of threat – however insignificant – to Roman rule. They would have been “freedom fighters,” attempting to mobilize others to throw off the oppression of the Empire. But, though they “dare[d] to dream of a better world” than the one Rome dictated, those dreams violently and abruptly ended on their own crosses.

And, hanging there next to the crucified Christ, the true King, how do they respond to that utter disappointment? In two radically different ways. For one, the disappointment turns to anger. That this so-called King doesn't measure up to his own ideas of how a king should behave, that the Christ doesn't throw off Roman rule as any powerful king would, that Jesus doesn't save himself and those being tortured alongside him – all of it is too infuriating for the one criminal to bear. He adds to the derision of Jesus: “Are you not the Messiah, [the one anointed as king]?” he screams. “Save yourself and us!” Grant my wish. Fit my expectations. Do what *I* want you to do.

But the other crucified one responds another way. Though his dreams for salvation on his own terms have been just as broken as the other's, he doesn't have any set expectations of the King with whom he is crucified. He does not demand that Jesus fulfill his own personal desires, either lofty (like throwing off Roman rule) or more intimate (like ending his own suffering on the cross). Instead, this one sees the cross and the crown of thorns, the blood and the sweat and the suffering of Jesus and recognizes the signs of divine rule, the righteous one whose sacrifice draws the whole world to God, Christ the King.

And his only request is a simple one: “Remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

This fellow crucified one does not lay his own expectations on the kingship of Jesus. He puts his whole trust in the King to bring about the kingdom in his own Way. And all the fellow crucified one asks of Christ the King is to be remembered, to be brought to mind, to be included in the kingdom that even now, on the cross, Jesus makes real before him.

It is a request that Jesus affirms – for this so-called criminal and for all of us: “Truly I tell you, today, **today**, you will be with me in Paradise.”

In a few minutes, as we celebrate the Eucharist together, I will speak the words of institution, the words Jesus spoke to his friends the night before his death. Taking the bread, he broke it and gave it to them saying, “Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this *in remembrance* of me.”

By participating in the Eucharist together, by sharing in the feast of God's kingdom, we remember Jesus, bring to mind the kingship of Christ and acknowledge our belonging to him. In doing so, we, like the redeemed criminal, simultaneously ask to be remembered *by* Jesus, claimed as his own, one of his beloved friend.

And so, in this mutual remembering, in acknowledging our belonging to the kingdom of God over and above any other claim upon us, we participate in the creation of that divine kingdom, not as we would imagine it, not as we wish or want it to be, but according to the Way of Christ the King, as God wills it, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> For much of what follows here, I am indebted to Debie Thomas's essay "Today with Me" from *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*. Cascade Books, 2022