

## CHRIST: THE KING

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Luke 23:33-43

Today is a day that we in the church call Christ the King Sunday. Different cultures have their different calendars. There is the Chinese calendar. (This is the year of the tiger.) Jews have a calendar which is lunar-based. During the French Revolution in the late 1700s, the French government implemented what is known as the French Republican calendar with weeks that were ten days long instead of seven. The idea was to remove all religious and royalist influences from the calendar. The French used that calendar for about twelve years. The ancient Mayans had a calendar, but it said we would all be wiped out in the year 2012. It's been 10 years, so I guess we're okay.

Even the church has its own calendar. It begins with Advent and ends today. Today is the final Sunday of the church year. Advent begins next week. It will be a new liturgical year. The season of Advent is four weeks long and culminates with Christmas. From Christmas we go on to Lent and Easter, to Pentecost, and then back to Christ the King, where we are today.

In our church we like to talk about our lives as being a spiritual journey. The liturgical calendar takes us on such journey that is twelve months long. It is a journey we repeat over and over. When we imagine our lives as a journey, then we naturally imagine a starting and ending point. Our starting point, normally, would be our birth and the ending point, normally, our death.

We like to think of our journey as always moving onward and upward—like climbing a mountain. We would hope that our journey will take us closer and closer to God.

If we consider the liturgical calendar as such a journey that we follow each year then we run into a problem. When you reach Christ the King Sunday, the end of the year, are you at the top of the mountain? Where do you go from there? And how do you get down to start over at Advent? Do you jump off the side of the mountain? We prefer to end the year with a bang, not a splat.

It helps to think of the liturgical calendar not as a journey from point A to point B but as a circle, or a track that runners race on. Each time we complete circle, we are different—made different by the journey itself.

This year, I'll have a birthday this year—just like last year. But I'll be a different person in 2023 than I was in 2022. Each year when we celebrate Advent or Christmas or Easter or Christ the King, we do so differently because we have been

changed by our spiritual journey. Are you the same person that you were this time last year?

When we hear the title “Christ the King” and realize that it is the final Sunday on the church calendar, our impulse is to celebrate, to pump our arms in the air, and hoot in victory. We’ve done it. We are triumphant. Christ is King. He’s victorious. The season is over and we’ve won the Super Bowl, the World Series, the SEC championship. Raise your glass of champagne and light the Roman candles.

What does it really mean to say that Christ is king? As Americans, we don’t really have an innate understanding of a king. We can describe a king, but we don’t know what it is like to live under one. Our leaders are elected and serve terms. They don’t serve for life and then hand the job over to their offspring. We don’t have royal families.

So, what is a king? We think of a king (or a queen) as one who rules, who controls, who governs. A true king has absolute control over all aspects of their people’s lives. They are above the law. They are the law.

In scripture, Jesus of Nazareth is identified as king of the Jews. Shortly after his birth, the Magi came to Jerusalem asking, *Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.* At his temptation, the Devil promised Jesus *all the kingdoms of the world* and promised them to him, if only Jesus would worship the devil. Jesus refused.

Jesus spent his adult years traveling through Judah and Galilee preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God. He performed deeds of power; he healed the sick and disabled, he performed miracles, all to proclaim God’s name to the world.

But his words caught the attention of the Jewish leaders who saw him as a threat, so they conspired with the Romans to have him executed. And that is our reading for today.

Here, near the end of Luke’s gospel account, we are told that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, arrested by the authorities, tried by the Romans, and condemned to crucifixion. This execution was to happen at a place called The Skull.

And what happens next is one of the power passages in our Bible. Every sentence, every phrase hits like a hammer hitting nails into a coffin. It is relentless.

They brought Jesus to the Skull and they placed him on a cross between two criminals as if he were a criminal himself. But even from the cross, Jesus prays to God to forgive his executioners, saying, *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.* And even while he is praying, they are casting lots to see who gets his clothes.

The Jewish people stood watching as the leaders taunted Jesus saying, *He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one.*

On top of that, the soldiers stationed there continued to mock Jesus. On the cross, exposed to the elements, he was no doubt thirsty. They offered him sour wine to drink. They said to him, *If you are King of the Jews, save yourself!* They say this because over the cross was a sign saying, *This is the King of the Jews*—again, mocking him.

And remember, he has been placed between two criminals and even one of them taunts him. That man kept saying, *Aren't you supposed to be the Messiah? Then save yourself and save us, too.*

Oddly, the criminal on the other side challenges the first saying, *Don't you fear God? You are going to die here as well. We are guilty, but this man is innocent.* And then he turns and says, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* And Jesus' response to him is, *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.* This criminal recognized the type of king Jesus is.

You would be right to wonder why I would read this crucifixion story on the Sunday that we call Christ the King, a day to celebrate Christ' rule. This painful passage would seem to do just the opposite by lifting up Jesus' crucifixion and death.

But that is the point. Jesus is king, but what kind of king. Is he the king who controls a nation and demands that the people follow his will? Or is he something else?

He is something else. His kingdom is not of this earth. He does not wield power but humility. He does not wield vengeance but love. He does not wield violence but justice.

That sign placed over him proclaiming him king of the Jews was not wrong. The irony is that Jesus truly is king, but of a different kingdom, a kingdom that we aspire to enter. It is God's realm.

Jesus is the king that strive to follow. It's not easy because his kingdom is at odds with our desire for power.

As Paul writes, *We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.* The cross is not an easy sell. We are asked to follow someone who was executed. He lost. Our challenge is to see beyond the cross into Christ's kingdom.

During Advent, we will look again at the type of king that Jesus is. We will look at this reading from the prophecy of Isaiah: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his*

*government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.*

On this day that we celebrate Christ as King, let us recall he is not a king of armies but of sheep—lost sheep. He is king but he died for us on the cross. He was hungry, thirsty, naked, and abandoned. Jesus calls his followers to care, not to conquer, to love, not to manipulate, to deliver, not destroy. His soldiers are armed only with compassion.

So, today, as we celebrate Christ the King, let us take a moment and remember what kind of king Jesus is. He is a poor king—born in a barn. He talks about a kingdom of heaven, not any kingdom on earth. He does not inhabit a palace but walks across the countryside preaching to the crowds. He has no army, just disciples. His crown is not gold but thorns. He doesn't hobnob with the nobility but embraces the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the imprisoned. He is a king for all.

This day of Christ the King is not the end but the transition into Advent and Christmas. We circumnavigate the year being challenged and changed by every revolution. But when we arrive at Christ the King, we may be at the top of the mountain, but we don't have to climb down to Advent. Advent has been raised to our level waiting for us to start again, this time just a bit closer to God.