

“OF KINGS AND KINGDOMS”

November 23, 2025 -- Luke 23: 33-43
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Kings sure aren't what they used to be.

Back in the gospel writer Luke's time there were kings of Israel and Caesars of Rome. Not all that long ago, historically speaking, there were Czars in Russia, kings in France, Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, and Kaisers of Germany. They were all very powerful and privileged. They ruled by whim, and the people felt fortunate indeed if from time to time they got a good one, or even one that wasn't too bad.

With a couple of notable exceptions, they're all gone, now. The decline of the royals as actual holders of power in the world began to wane after the World War I ended and people who had seen the massive horror that was modern warfare determined that no king would ever again order anyone into that kind of bloody conflagration. By 1925 any kings that were left on their thrones were figureheads only trotted out and put on show for state celebrations and charity galas. Even the royal family of England has had to reinvent itself to win the support of English taxpayers, thanks to the alleged antics of Prince Andrew (or should I say the Andrew formerly known as Prince). Verse three of *Onward Christian Soldiers* has become rather prophetic:

Crowns and thrones may perish,
Kingdoms rise and wane,
But the Church of Jesus
Constant will remain.

Many who managed to survive the war rejected not only the divine right of kings but the existence of a deity who would make or even allow such a terrible obscenity as war. People, especially those on the European continent began turn away from religion and toward atheism and humanism as they existed in nationalism, the adoration and worship of the nation state.

Pope Pius XI saw ahead of others where such extremism in the name of patriotism could lead so he set out to remind Catholics and Christians of all stripes that we have but one emperor, one Lord, one king and that king is Jesus Christ. It is to him alone that we owe our fealty and our allegiance. It is he alone who gives us our marching orders and any orders that we receive that are contrary to his are to be considered null and void regardless of the source.

To this end, Pope Pius created a feast day to be celebrated by all Catholics on the Sunday before All Saints Day and that Sunday would be The Feast of Christ the King. In 1969, Pope Paul VI moved the date to the last Sunday before the beginning of advent, the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Shortly thereafter, Methodists, Episcopalians, Anglicans, and Presbyterians joined in celebrating Christ the King Sunday or as it is called by some, Reign of Christ Sunday, for all the same reasons that Pope Pius created it in the first place, as an alternative and a challenge to nationalism in general and especially Christian nationalism and to remind us that we have but one king and that is Jesus.

Still, the concept of monarchy is a difficult one for Americans to swallow. We did, after all, fight a war to throw off that burden, never to be picked up again. In America and some parts of Europe, some of the power and majesty we once attributed to kings is now imitated by stars of television, music, sports, and Hollywood. Today's movers and shakers are politicians and billionaires.

Elvis is still called "The King," decades after his death. Michael Jackson was "The King of Pop." Aretha Franklin is the "Queen of Soul." Queen Latifah is the queen of hip-hop. Howard Stern calls himself the "King of All Media."

Businesses are referred to as empires. Business and political families are called dynasties. Burger King uses their name and only recently retired that creepy king statue thing that was supposed to remind us that they are the kings of fast food hamburgers. The largest political demonstrations in the history of this country have been to object to what the demonstrators refer to as President Trump's thinking of himself as a king and his predilection for acting like one – or so they say.

We Americans can't talk about royalty without planting our tongue in our cheek. We tend to find talk of kings and queens and royalty of any kind a little anachronistic – at best, silly and, at worst, offensive.

We don't do royalty here; we are a republic. We believe in democracy and egalitarianism. The very notion of a king ruling by divine right and telling us what we can or can't do is noxious to us. We live not by commands but by rights. We are a nation not of persons but of laws. Even the lowest, meanest criminal can say with confidence, "I know my rights."

And, as often as not, we make judgments about our leaders based on what they can do for us. Every four years we hear: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" We have become a country where the role of government is to protect our rights and, at the same time, make us a little better off every year.

As loyal subjects of Christ the King, however, we're called to a very different sort of citizenship than the one Americans are accustomed to -- one in which our notions of personal rights and how our lives can be made better are reversed. Instead, Jesus invites us to follow his commands and live in his metaphorical kingdom... and what that means confounds our basic expectations about how things are supposed to work.

Jesus invites us to become citizens of a **kingdom**, God's kingdom, and in a kingdom our obsession with our rights takes a backseat to our duties and responsibilities toward our sovereign ruler.

WE KNOW OUR RIGHTS

American Christians like to talk about their rights. We are all very clear about the first amendment to the constitution. It comes, we recall, in two clauses. First is the establishment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion..." Then the exercise clause: "or the free exercise thereof." This amendment, we learn early on in our

civics classes, gives us certain rights. So, it's probably no wonder that we Christians tend to go there first when we find ourselves put off, put out, inconvenienced, irritated, annoyed, or ignored.

Hey! We've got rights!

And paramount among these religious rights is the right to hold whatever religious beliefs we choose. We are even free to hold no religious beliefs at all. We are also free to exercise those beliefs -- that is to worship in whatever way we choose. No one can tell us what we have to believe, and no one can force us to act as though we believe something we don't. We go to church -- if and when we go to church -- because we choose to, not because we have to.

These freedoms given to us by God and protected by the Constitution have limits, however. If your worship practices include taking illegal drugs or torturing animals or making human sacrifices... well, we kind of draw the line there. No right, no matter how sacred, is absolute. Other people have rights, too.

The arguments occur when the rights of one group seem to conflict with the rights of another. When one group wants to put a copy of the Ten Commandments on the courthouse steps, they believe they should be able to -- and they cite the "free expression" clause. Another group says that the courthouse steps belong to everyone and should not be used to favor one religious expression over another -- and they cite the "establishment" clause.

Some say that this battle of the clauses should favor the majority -- we are a democracy, after all. The other group says that one of the major purposes of the Constitution is to protect minorities from the tyranny of the majority.

The debate over healthcare (which apparently is never going to end) is often another battle over rights. One group insists that essential health care is a basic human right of every individual. Others say that it isn't a right at all, it is a privilege reserved for those who can afford it.

The abortion wars in this country have been fought, most often, on the battlefield of whose rights take priority. One group says that the deciding right is that of a woman to control her own body, the other group insists that the deciding right is that of the fetus to be brought to term.

Every time a bipartisan committee brings forth a list of proposals on how to move toward balancing the national budget, and the immediate response from both sides of the political aisle is a very loud and vociferous discussion of rights -- whose are being infringed upon and whose were being honored.

Whenever and wherever the democratic ideal is upheld, rhetoric and debate are usually couched in terms of rights. But in the Roman Empire of 30 CE, there was no democratic ideal. It had disappeared with the passing of Greece's golden age. The last vestiges of the Roman Republic had disappeared in 15 CE when Tiberius Caesar transferred the elections from the popular assemblies to the Senate. By Jesus' time, the emperor was considered immortal and

divine. His word was law; his whim was edict.

Rights? No one spoke of rights. No one dared. The Empire was a law unto itself. The Empire was all.

LIFE IN A KINGDOM

On this last Sunday of the Christian year, Christ the King Sunday, we remember the scandalously subversive nature of Jesus' proclamation of an alternative empire to that of Caesar. And we remember the terrible risk and tremendous courage that was required to make that proclamation as well as the price he paid for making it.

In his brilliant book *God and Empire*, John Dominic Crossan lays out a striking comparison between the Empire (Kingdom) offered by Caesar and the Kingdom (Empire) offered by Jesus. Caesar's empire was based on power that was exercised through violence. The *Pax Romana* was a false peace teetering on a pinnacle built of repression, suppression, oppression, and cruelty. The Roman religion worshiped gods that were merely personifications of the empire itself. And they worshiped emperors whose power came through their ability to crush any alternative form of rule. Peace was an illusion, merely a time of tense quietude created by the power of the legions to punish and silence all dissenting voices.

The important thing for us to realize, says Crossan, is that *the Roman Empire never really died*. It lives on, today. The promises of empire are still out there tempting and enticing us. The vision of peace through violence and freedom through oppression is spoken in the halls of power every day. False gods that are nothing more than caricatures of our own lusts for power and privilege beckon to us and bid us worship at altars of their own making. The very pillars that upheld Rome are touted by would be leaders on every hand today in both the east and the west – racism, imperialism, blind and unthinking nationalism, religious intolerance, and the worship of military power.

The kingdom offered by Jesus was a true alternative to that of Rome then and now. His is a kingdom built on love and kindness, whose goal is justice and whose end is *shalom* -- true peace. In this kingdom, the first are last and the last are first, the privileged and powerful are brought low, and the weak and powerless are raised up. The poor, the hungry, those who mourn, and those who make peace are blessed -- while the well-fed, the comfortable and the violent, are doomed to lives of woeful existence. Those who are blind are made to see, and those who can see, don't. The foul are made clean, the outcasts are included, the guilty are forgiven, and the lonely are embraced. This is the alternative kingdom that Jesus offers for those who would accept and follow him -- not as an elected leader, not as president or prime minister, but as Lord.

The battle over "rights" is a contemporary aberration. The word never appears in the New Testament. It is an "extra-biblical" concern and one of secondary importance for Christians. Our concern is over kingdoms. Our choice is not about whose rights win out, but over which kingdom we will serve. Kings and kingdoms, you see, do not bestow rights -- they demand allegiance. They do not protect entitlements -- they require fealty. They do not speak of

prerogatives but of duties and responsibilities.

The passage we read this morning, the story of the crucifixion and the death of Jesus, reminds us of how seriously Jesus took his duties and responsibilities as king of this radical, subversive, alternative empire. The question for us is how seriously, as we enter this new Christian year, we will take ours.

THE WISE, YOUNG KING

I will close, this morning, with a parable.

There's an ancient story out of Taiwan, about a wise, young king who made his mission to end the practice of human sacrifice. From time immemorial, it had been his people's practice once a year to execute an innocent victim. This, they believed, would placate the gods and insure a good harvest.

The new king outlawed human sacrifice -- and for a few years, the weather cooperated with his decree. But then a terrible drought hovered over the land, and the crops began to fail. With each week that went by without rain, more and more of the people demanded a return to the old ways. Finally, the young king saw he had no way out. He had but two choices: rescind his decree banning human sacrifice and let the sacrifices take place again, or face revolution.

The king informed the dissenters of his decision: He would reinstate the sacrifice. He told them to go at dawn the next morning to a certain large tree in the forest. There they would find their victim, prepared for the executioner's sword. The executioner was to strike fast and true; this way, the harvest would be assured.

The next morning, the delegation followed the king's instructions to the letter. They found their victim tied to the tree, hooded and dressed in a red robe. With relief, they killed him immediately, chopping off his head. As the hood rolled away from the severed head, their joy turned to horror as they saw the sacrifice was none other than the young king himself.

They say human sacrifice stopped that day in Taiwan. It never came back. Even to this day, there are still followers of that young king. They dress in red robes on festival occasions to honor his memory. They call themselves "People of the Robe."

The kingdom of God still calls out to us, offering us a radical alternative based on love, kindness, gentleness, compassion, and self-sacrifice. And it is still as subversive, scandalous, and dangerous as it ever was.

As we enter a new Christian year, Christ offers his example and invites us to enter and join not a church but a radical, subversive *movement* that challenges the assumptions of Caesar's empire wherever it raises its head... and bids welcome to all who would live for grace and love.

Scary? Dangerous? You bet.
But that's what Easter's for.

AMEN