

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2025

Luke 23: 33-43 – Christ the King

“What kind of king do you want?” In one sense, this is the question Jesus put before those crucify him.

Keep in mind that just days earlier the crowds of Jerusalem had greeted Jesus as their king, rolling out the “red carpet” as it were by spreading their cloaks on the road, and receiving him as the one sent by the Lord (Luke 19:36-40). And now he is rejected, derided by the leaders of the people, then the soldiers, and even one of the criminals next to them. They mock his titles, asking why, if he is Messiah, chosen One, and King, he does not save himself.

“What kind of king do you want?” Jesus asks them. And they reply that they want a different king, one who is powerful, one who can save himself and others, one who can take vengeance on his and their enemies.

I wonder if Jesus’ question to us is much different. If not, “What kind of king?” at least, “What kind of leader?”

Jesus, to put it another and more pointed way, would *not* have won last week’s election.

Jesus refuses to come in power but instead appears in abject vulnerability. He does not vow retribution on even those who crucify him but instead offers forgiveness. He does not come down off his cross to prove his kingly status but instead remains on that instrument of torture and humiliation, the representative of all who suffer unjustly. And he does not promise a better tomorrow but instead offers to redeem us today.

Have you ever noticed that? That Jesus doesn’t tell the repentant criminal that someday *in the future* he will enter into God’s presence but instead says “*Today*, you shall be with me in paradise.” Today, now, in this very moment. Christians have sometimes been accused of pining for a distant and better future and therefore sitting out the struggles and challenges of the day. But in these verses Jesus is focused on this very moment, promising that those who believe in him, those who see in his vulnerability the revelation of God’s mercy and grace, will be ushered into God’s presence immediately.

Luke’s Gospel warns us against spiritualizing the kind of leadership Jesus offers. For in Luke’s story of the crucifixion, the one dimension of Jesus that is emphasized above all others is Jesus’ innocence. Notice the words of the repentant criminal as he rebukes his comrade: “We indeed have been condemned *justly*, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but his man *has done nothing wrong*.”

The verses that follow these are even more direct, as the Roman centurion, after witnessing Jesus’ death, declares, “Certainly this man was innocent.” Luke’s depiction, in this instance, is a stark

departure from that of Matthew and Luke, who record the centurion as saying, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” In this account, it is Jesus’ innocence, rather than his divine parentage, that is paramount. And this is not to heighten our sense of tragedy but rather to remind us that Jesus stands with all the innocent of the world, all the vulnerable and forgotten, all those who suffer injustice and oppression. And when he is raised he promises God’s vindication to all those the world has similarly discarded.

Jesus calls leaders of all kinds – and, indeed, any who would call him “Lord” – to join God’s insistent, consistent, and persistent solidarity with the weak, the oppressed, and the forgotten of this world. In short, the church of Jesus Christ reveals itself as faithful to its Lord only in so far as it stands with those who are most vulnerable. Whatever our understandable desire for strength and security, God calls us not only to identify with the weak and dispossessed, but to lift our voices on their behalf, calling leaders to care for them as parents care for their children. Jesus leaves behind all the strength and power of his status – as Paul writes, “emptying himself and taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7) – in order to redeem those who are weak, vulnerable, and lost.

And that includes us.

“What kind of king do you want?” Jesus asks. And the answer most gave him, both in the first century and the twenty-first, is “Not this one,” preferring instead some demonstration of power to vulnerability. Except for those moments when, like the criminal who beseeched God’s mercy, we recognize that if we are to get what we deserve, then we have no hope. If we choose to live in a world where might makes right, we will all eventually lose. And if we prefer a world where the rule of the day is “an eye for an eye,” all of us will be blind and the whole, indeed, will eventually lay in ruin. At those moments, Jesus reminds us that far from promising us a better future, he redeems us today, not only forgiving us for what we have done or not done, but setting us free to stand with those in need around us, advocating for their welfare, demanding their just treatment, and seeing in them the very presence of the God who always takes the side of the vulnerable.

Jesus is perhaps not the king or leader we may want, but he is the one we need. Our task is to declare the wonders of his love, grace, and mercy that we might hear and follow his call. Amen.