

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Recently there has been a nationwide movement called No Kings. This movement as you all may or may not know, is a nationwide grassroots movement against authoritarian overreach and billionaire influence in the U.S. government. That's all I'll say about this movement. But I bring it up because, for some, the title of our Sunday, Christ the King may stir up some mixed emotions. So, I will begin by asking, do we take offense to the title of Christ the King Sunday, in that it sounds heavy-handed or hierarchical? Does our offense then get in the way of really considering or wanting to even understand what this title really means? Or, do we just simply see it as a title of a Sunday and nothing more? I ask these questions because the title of the day is meant to stir in us a curiosity or a desire to better understand the reign of Jesus Christ and what that means for us as Christian followers of Jesus Christ. So, if we are offended, it only shows then that we don't fully understand the reign of Christ as king.

When we hear Christ the King it may stir images that we see in icons and see in various artists' interpretations of a king...images that may stir controversy such as this notional movement because of *our* interpretation of a king. Do we see Christ as a king with all the pomp and ceremony we see taking place today around the modern monarchies? Is our perception of Christ the King influenced by the opulence of a king and do we then interpret Christ as a king with great wealth, luxury, and extravagance that is associated with our perception of a monarch or royalty? Perhaps we see Christ the King seated upon a great throne in a visible display of status and luxury that encompasses lavish and grand material possessions, such as gilded palaces, ornate furnishings, surrounded by an extensive troop of attendants, aides, and servants...engaging in elaborate ceremonies, which serve as symbols of power and high social standing...leaving us to only view our king from a distance because a king like this will never associate with the likes of any of us, "commoners." Is this the reign of Christ we perceive and celebrate today? Of course not. BUT, but, there are hints of this perception of a king that seeps into our vision and assessment of Christ as King.

We hold onto this perception of Christ our King because when we hear Jesus say today, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise," we want that paradise to be as opulent as our lavish perception of Christ as our King. Moreover, when we recognize Christ as our perceived lavish king we also associate him with power. There seems to be some kind of unspoken power here that we fear and at the same time, it's a power we want, rather we want it to work in our favor.

Listen again to the Gospel lesson as the people stood by watching Jesus and the others slowly die on the cross. In this passage we hear that the leaders scoffed at Jesus saying,

"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"
(Luke 23:35b)

We then hear the soldiers also mocked him saying,

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23:37)

Even one of the criminals next to him on the cross derides Jesus and shows us the power we want to work in our favor, the power we assume a king ought to be able to wield,

"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39b)

We too, in our own ways scoff at Jesus. We mock and we deride our Lord when we want Christ our king to act in our favor or to give us our desired outcomes. We, like the characters in this Gospel passage, evoke our understanding of the power of a king into Jesus. But in every element of this story we, like the characters in this lesson, want a king with vengeance, we want retribution because this is our identity of our Messiah as our King. Rather, this how we see it. Peter even made an attempt to stop the whole thing before it even began, but Jesus rebukes Peter and says to him:

For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.
(Matt 16:23, Mark 8:33)

Jesus is reminding Peter and us that we really do not see the whole picture...even as Jesus hangs on the cross dying. Likewise, our idea of a king is not who or what Jesus truly is.

This scene before us, as difficult and as heart wrenching as it may be, it is the salvation of the world, it is the fulfillment of Holy Scripture, it is Jesus Christ the King in its fullest sense. In this scene we see that Jesus is not a king of power and vengeance, but a humble and humiliated king with salvific power. Sadly, we want Christ our King to reign down vengeance. We invoke this perception of power into that title because we assume that same kind of power for ourselves through our faith. Moreover, we expect then, through our faith, that God will reign down that fearful power of a shrewd monarch that wields our judgments and our condemnations over others and extends grace and love to me...and those who share "my" views and understandings of Christ as a vengeful King.

But clearly, this passage from Luke's Gospel shows us that the reign of Christ the King does not involve domination or triumphalism, rather it shows us the luxurious, the lavish, and the grand opulence of God's all-powerful compassion and love in Jesus seeking justice for all. The reign of Christ as seen throughout his ministry is so purely captured in this scene in this simple prayer:

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

The reign of Christ the King mediates the forgiving love of God for sinful people...people like us commoners...us sinners that our king is deeply associated with. Luke stresses Jesus' association with sinners throughout his Gospel. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sought to draw in, to connect with, and to walk with the outcasts whom the Pharisees excluded from society. From the start we hear of the depth in which our king associates with us:

²¹ When all the people were baptized, Jesus, too, was baptized. (Luke 3:21)

From this passage we hear that our king is washed in the same saving waters as we are. The Apostle Matthew or Levi was a tax collector, who is known to have abused his power when betraying his fellow Jews by collecting more taxes from them than was required by the Roman government. But this is who Jesus calls to be an Apostle and right after he is called, we hear this in the Gospel:

²⁹ Levi held a large reception at his home for Jesus. A huge crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. (Luke 5:29)

We then hear a little later:

15:1 All the tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus. ²But the Pharisees and the experts in Moses' Teachings complained, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2)

And let's not forget the meal with the Pharisee at his house where a woman of the city, a woman who is called a sinner, came in and bathed the feet of Jesus with her tears and then let down her hair to wipe his feet dry. And now today in our Gospel lesson, we see the reign of Christ our King and his association with two other criminals who hang with him on a cross.

The identification of our King and his reign has certainly reached a climax here on the cross. Here is our king's reign as he himself is baptized like us sinners, eats with us just as he will eat with us again today, and now, we see him die as a criminal. In the reign of Christ our King we see this King not only sharing fellowship with sinners, he also shares the shame of sinners of all kinds, including the worst of them. And in that most humiliating and shameful moment we hear him pray, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. This prayer is not just for sinners in general, it is for the individuals who scoff at him, those who mock him, those who deride him, those who called out, "crucify him," and even those who have hammered the very nails that hang him from the cross.

But in light of all that we have done to our King, our king does not respond with power and vengeance, he responds with a prayer of forgiveness. We are all the ones who share the fate of the forgiveness of this crucifixion. The reign of our King intercedes with the Father for us all who struggle to understand the true nature of this King...a king who is unlike any king we have ever seen, experienced, or tried to understand...a king whose opulence is not seen in wealth, power, and vengeance, but in compassion, grace, mercy, and love.

Today our King shows us an alternative to the reign of kings, queens, and emperors we have come to know throughout history. Today we learn of a King who loves and seeks justice for all people and shows us the grandeur of grace and forgiveness. Our King shows us the opulence of life-changing power that is based in loving our Heavenly Father and our neighbor.

Today, as we celebrate the reign of Christ our King, may we see power and glory NOT in vengeance or strength, not in dominance or supremacy, rather, may we see Christ our King take on our shame, our sin, and make this promise of Good News for all who see the salvific power of this King:

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Today we too are with our King in Paradise...a paradise that is NOT some cosmic far away lavish palace in the sky...the paradise Jesus speaks of is the very promise of the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation of our souls. This paradise we share with our King is not above us, but here with us, in the promise of this Holy Meal, feeding our souls and saying to us, this is my body, this is my blood, given for you, assuring us, strengthening us in that promise of paradise.

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