"What Kind of King?"

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Luke 23:33-43

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Christ the King + Reign of Christ

There have been a lot of famous kings throughout history. Emperor Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, who ushered in an era of peace and prosperity. Charlemagne, who united much of Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Peter the Great, who brought Russia into the modern age. Some kings are remembered for their military exploits. Alexander the Great, who was undefeated in battle and ruled over an empire that stretched from Greece to India. Genghis Khan, who conquered large parts of China and central Asia. Napoleon Bonaparte, who conquered most of Europe. Some kings are remembered for the fear and terror they caused. Ivan the Terrible, a paranoid and cruel Russian Tsar who massacred entire cities. Leopold of Belgium, who caused millions of deaths through starvation, forced labor, and murder. Attila the Hun, who sacked cities across Europe and massacred their inhabitants. In more recent times, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, and Adolf Hitler, while not technically "kings," claimed absolute power and were responsible for mass atrocities and millions of deaths. History is littered with bloodshed caused by kings and rulers like these. But other kings are remembered for being quite *good*. Ashoka the Great, an Indian Emperor who, after converting to Buddhism, dedicated his reign to promoting peace, tolerance, and the welfare of his people. Cyrus the Great, a benevolent Persian Emperor who freed the Jews from their captivity in Babylon and allowed the people he governed to practice their own religions and customs. Suleiman the Magnificent, an Ottoman Sultan who reformed the legal system, made taxes more fair, and promoted education, arts, and science. The list goes on and on, all of them leaving their imprint on the world. Some of these men genuinely tried to do *good* for the people they governed. Others cared more about their own power and privilege. Some had personalities that attracted fans and followers like a cult. And some were hated by just about everybody.

The Bible is full of kings. King David is generally considered the greatest King ancient Israel ever had, and – despite a few noteworthy personal sins – he was a man filled with a remarkable faith in God. King Solomon is remembered for his great wisdom, and for building the first temple in Jerusalem. King Hezekiah and King Josiah both oversaw major religious reforms, reinstating laws and practices that had been abandoned or forgotten. Not all were like this. King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel are remembered for their wickedness and their persecution of prophets like Elijah. King Manasseh is remembered for his idolatrous practices that included child sacrifice; he burned his own sons alive as an offering to another god. Seven Israelite kings came to power by assassinating their predecessor. In the New Testament, numerous kings and rulers make important appearances or are mentioned by name. Tiberius was the Roman Emperor during the ministry of Jesus. Herod the Great was King when Jesus was born; Matthew tells us that he murdered all the children in and around Bethlehem. Herod's son King Antipas was responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Herod the Great's grandson King

Agrippa I persecuted early Christians and was responsible for the death of the apostle James. Agrippa's son, King Agrippa II, questioned the apostle Paul and sent him off to Rome to be tried by the Emperor. Pontius Pilate was only a governor, but he ruled like a king. We all remember him for the role he played in Jesus's death, but what you might not know is that he was so cruel and oppressive that, about six years later, the Roman government removed Pilate from office and recalled him back to Rome. All these kings and rulers play an important role in the biblical story. The Bible would not be what it is without these kings; indeed, our *faith* would not be what it is, without the imprint left by these kings.

There is, of course, one King who stands at the head of the pack, towering over them all. We call him "King of kings" and "Lord of lords," phrases that come straight from the New Testament, once in Paul's first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:15) and twice in the book of Revelation (Revelation 17:14 and 19:16). This King is also called "the blessed and only Sovereign" (1 Timothy 6:15), and towards the end of his ministry his followers hailed him as "the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:11, 29, 37; Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:3, 37, 38; John 18:33, 39; John 19:3, 19, 21). That was the inscription that was nailed over his head on the cross. His opponents thought they were mocking him. *He's no king*, they thought; *he's just some foolish wannabe who got caught*. But, in actuality, they were right to put that sign over his head. They *were* crucifying a king. A king greater than *any* earthly king, living or dead, past, present, or future. They weren't executing just *any* king, or wannabe king – they were executing the *King of kings*.

Today is the last Sunday in the Christian year. We call it "Christ the King" Sunday, or the "Reign of Christ" Sunday. It's a day to remind us who Jesus is. Not just who Jesus *was* – all the stories about him that we read in the Gospels – but who he *is*, even now. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, opens a new year, and we will start telling Christ's story all over again, beginning with his promised coming, then at Christmas his incarnation and birth, and a couple weeks later his baptism, then key moments in his ministry, then on Good Friday his death and on Easter Sunday his resurrection. We tell this story over and over again, year after year; we've been telling this same story for nearly two thousand years. Indeed, four and a half years from now we will celebrate the 2000th anniversary of Christ's resurrection. But, every year, we take one Sunday out of fifty-two to remember not just who Christ was *on earth*, but who he remains *even now*, and to the end of time. The King of kings, and Lord of lords!

Our Gospel lesson today is a relatively brief portion of Luke's account of Christ's passion. It is a well-chosen passage for this Sunday. We read this passage every Good Friday, as part of the larger narrative of the events that led to Christ's death, but rarely do we pause to consider what is going on in *this* part of the story. Things are being done to Jesus, of course; he is impaled to two beams of wood and left to die. Crucifixion was a brutal form of execution. Depending on the person's physical condition and what other injuries they have suffered, it could take hours or even days for the condemned person to die. Ultimately, death comes about through a combination of dehydration, exhaustion, and asphyxiation. Crucifixion had been used as a form of execution for centuries, and the Romans used it routinely, killing thousands upon thousands of criminals and rebels in this manner. The Gospels tell us that two other people were crucified at the same time and in the same place as Jesus, just outside the city walls of Jerusalem: two criminals, one hanging from a cross to Jesus's right side and the other hanging on a cross to his left. In Christian art they are typically depicted wearing a loincloth; in reality all three of them had probably been stripped of *all* their clothing, to add to their public humiliation.

We know next to nothing about these two men who were crucified alongside Jesus. The wording in the Gospels suggests they might have been thieves, bandits, or insurrectionists, but we can't be any more specific than that. We also do not know their names – although they were given names by Christians, later on. By the fourth century, one of them – the one who derided Jesus and said to him "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" – had been given the name Gestas. The other one – the one who said that the two of them were getting what they deserved for their deeds, "but this man has done nothing wrong" – was given the name Dismas. Luke indicates that Dismas *knew* who Jesus was, *recognized* him for who he is. Looking at Jesus while both of them are hanging on their crosses and slowly dying, Dismas says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Dismas is known as "the penitent thief." He has been canonized as a Saint in the Roman Catholic Church. Several branches of the Christian church commemorate him every year. Some Christian prayers include references to him. Some churches have been named for him – "The Church of the Good Thief," "Saint Dismas Church," and so on. There's also the Dismas Ministry, which is a Catholic outreach to inmates in prison across our country – a very appropriate name for a prison ministry. Would that every prisoner could develop the faith of Dismas.

I want to draw your attention to two particular things that Jesus *does* while he's dying on the cross. We tend to see the events surrounding Jesus's crucifixion as things that *were done to him*. We often fail to note the things that *Jesus himself chooses to do*. I've just named one of them: looking at that penitent thief and declaring that he will be in Paradise with Jesus. Whatever crimes Dismas may or may not have committed, Jesus is reassuring him of his place in God's eternal kingdom. He may have been judged by humans, but ultimately it's not *human* judgment that matters. Jesus tells this dying man that God has looked into his heart – and found it *worthy*. There is a place in Paradise for him.

There's a second thing that Jesus actively chooses to do here. Jesus is hanging on a cross to die, with dozens or maybe hundreds of people looking at him. Some of those actively participated in his condemnation and death. These are the "bad guys," right, the people who committed that brutal deed? But Jesus looks out at these people – these people who beat him, these people who pounded nails through his hands and feet, these people who will mock him and cast lots for his clothing – he surveys all these people from the cross on which he will die, and he lifts up a prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." This is remarkable, and we don't think about it often enough. Here Jesus is, in his most vulnerable state *ever*, beaten, bloodied, humiliated, dying, and *he finds it in his heart* to forgive the people who have done these horrible things to him. *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.* Even in the midst of his very real pain and his very real suffering, *Jesus still offers grace* to people who may or may not deserve it. Ask any of the children or youth who come here on Wednesday afternoons what "grace" means, and they will tell you, because they've memorized it: it's God's free gift of love that we do not deserve and cannot earn. Those people don't deserve it and they certainly haven't earned it, but Jesus gives it to them anyway. *Grace*. God's *free gift* of *love*.

What kind of king is this? A very different kind of king from any the world has ever known. A king who came not to *rule*, but to *serve*. A king who came not to *kill*, but to *save*. A king who came not to *condemn*, but to *forgive*. A king who offers to his people *one particular thing* in all sorts of different circumstances and in all sorts of different ways. What does this king offer? This king offers *love*.

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