

**St. Francis Episcopal Church**  
**The Last Sunday of Pentecost: Christ the King**  
**Text: Luke 23:33-43**  
**© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson**

---

As that great contemporary theologian, Mel Brooks, once said: “it’s good to be the king.” Or how about Tom Petty?

It’s good to be king, if just for a while  
To be there in velvet, yeah, to give ‘em a smile.  
It’s good to get high and never come down  
It’s good to be king of your own little town.

Whenever we come to the end of the church’s liturgical year, I am reminded of that exchange between Alice in Wonderland and Humpty Dumpty. Remember?

**Humpty Dumpty:** When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.

**Alice:** The question is, whether you can make words mean so many different things.

Today is the last week in the church year—the culmination of the long season after Pentecost sometimes known as “Christ the King” Sunday. But most of us have some idea in our heads about what a king is, and how kings behave, and so the jarring question of the day is this: what does it mean to say that a man who dies on a cross is “the king of the Jews?” Can one word mean so many different things? We know kings to be powerful and willing to engage in *Real Politic* when necessary and to do what it takes to hold onto their power and even to extend the realm of their power whenever possible. But this reading from Luke’s Gospel—this Good Friday text—challenges all of those notions and offers us another kind of king: one who is executed as an enemy of the state between two criminals. Can one word mean such different things?

As we come to the end of the liturgical calendar our readings tend to be oriented toward the future: that was true last week and it will be true next week as well when we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. Today we hear Jeremiah speaking in the future tense about the God who will raise up “a Son of David, a king who shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Zechariah sings to his son (John the Baptist) about how he will prepare the way for the one who will come after him. Jesus promises the thief on the cross a future in paradise—even if that future is imminent.

We find ourselves at the Place of a Skull, and in some ways that is jarring given all of the triumphalist language of the hymns that go along with this day. It’s one thing when you have the whole season of Lent to prepare but it comes seemingly out of nowhere today. And yet the truth is that if we mean to understand who Jesus is then always we will find ourselves coming back to the foot of the cross. The story told on the very walls of this worship space about the Way of the Cross as the way of life tells the story of a king who chooses forgiveness rather than revenge, who chooses to die so that others might live. That is the mystery set before us on this day and in a real sense every day of every week of our journeys in Christ.

*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* We are sometimes tempted to think that the work of the Church is to bring our version of Christian power to bear on the world. The thing is, however, that perspective has been tried in Christian history with horrific results. It seems that when Christians get all the power we are as likely to misuse it as anyone else. The Crusades and the Inquisition bear witness to the fact that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, and that Christians are not immune from all of that.

On the other end of the spectrum is an entirely different approach: one that keeps “heaven” and “earth” far apart. We conclude that Jesus has nothing to do with the kingdoms of this world and therefore nothing to do with our politics. Faith becomes small and privatized, a matter we tend to only for an hour or so each week before we head back into the “real” world. The “Kingdom of God” becomes a “spiritual” matter that has nothing to do with the here and now, but only with the world to come when we are freed from these “sinful” bodies.

That is not, however, the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. He taught us to pray for the Kingdom to come *on earth* as it is in heaven. He said the Kingdom was already in our midst for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. It may not be *from* this world but it has everything to do with the transformation of *this* world—until there are new heavens and a new earth.

What needs to change if we are to enter into this Kingdom is our understanding of power. We need to hear “king” and “lord” as meaning something very different than what we mean when we think of medieval British monarchs, even legendary ones like King Arthur who use might for right. We need to let go of our modern version of that same distortion: the superhero who always wins. Jesus lived in the context of Roman imperial power and of caesars who promised a *pax Romana*. Jesus promises a true peace among nations where swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and where war is studied no more.

But when Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God, he doesn’t point to Rome or medieval England or to Superman. He doesn’t say “it’s good to be the king.” Instead, he talks about mustard seeds. Remember? How the tiniest of seeds, watered and nurtured and pruned can become something much larger than anyone could possibly imagine. He tells stories about finding something of great value—like a pearl—and knowing that it matters more than anything else in our lives, so you sell all you have to have it. He reveals the Kingdom of God every time he kisses a leper clean, or makes a blind man see, or speaks with a woman at a well and validates her as a human being. The Kingdom of God is in our midst whenever the hungry are fed.

Jesus’ stories about the Kingdom of God are taken from the “real” world—from daily life. They are stories about enough food on the tables of the hungry for them to eat their fill, and healthcare for the poor, and abundant life for all God’s children. Those things continue to happen in our world, if we only have eyes to see. If you want to see the Kingdom of God breaking in, then go to the Mustard Seed in Worcester. Or take one of those who just returned from El Salvador out for a cup of coffee, and listen to their stories. Because Christ isn’t dead on that cross; he’s alive in the world and making all things new. It’s not always easy to see, or believe because the world is still in so many ways a mess. But in the midst of that mess God is present and the Kingdom of God is breaking in.

Jesus points us toward this world where he is already present and says: forgive...heal...love...do justice...love mercy...walk humbly with God. Because when you do these things, amazing things will happen. Jesus sets a child before us and says, “do you get it yet? Can you see the world through the eyes of this child? When you do, you will begin to understand the Kingdom of God.”

So this is Christ the King Sunday—a day for us to remember that that our higher power comes among us as one who serves, and then dies on a cross. That reveals a very different way to think about power. I like the way that William Sloan Coffin used to put it: Jesus reveals an alternative that is not about the “love of power, but the power of love.” It’s about God’s power to heal and transform and forgive and redeem. Where those things are happening, the kingdom is like yeast is that makes the whole loaf rise, and like salt that gives food its taste.

Christian communities like this one exist to keep that wisdom alive in a dog-eat-dog world. We don’t go out in order to lord it over others but to be in the world as those who serve. And in so doing, we bear witness to the love of God made known to us and the world at the foot of that Cross. We are called to love one another, as Christ has loved us. That sounds pretty easy, eh? Well it is—until you actually try doing it! One of the saddest and hardest parts of being a rector is to watch people walk away from Christian community when it’s too hard to love someone who offends you, or drives you crazy, or has a different point-of-view. People act in unlovely ways every day in our homes and in our workplaces and in our schools and yes, even in church. People gossip and speak untruths and hurt each other, sometimes with malice and sometimes without knowing what they are doing. And still Jesus says: “forgive.”

I was watching *Grey’s Anatomy* the other night. Dr. Miranda Bailey is a great character on that show, a tough black surgeon whom the interns call “the Nazi.” On this week’s show, however, a guy came into the O.R. who needed emergency surgery and he was a real Nazi, with a huge swastika tattooed on his belly. Dr. Bailey stood over him before cutting into him to pray. “I’m just callin’ on Jesus,” she said. One of the interns tries to interrupt her but she insists,

leave me alone, I’m callin’ on Jesus because I need help. I am not like this man, I am better than this, but I need Jesus’ help.

The man needed surgery regardless of his political views and she was a surgeon who could help him, even though that would be pretty hard to do. When we refuse to demand an eye for an eye and choose to rise above our desire for vengeance, the Kingdom of God is very near.

So we gather again at the foot of the cross, where Jesus forgives the soldiers who mocked and killed him, where Jesus forgives the religious authorities who betrayed him and turned him over to the Romans because he unsettled their doctrinal certitude; where Jesus forgives the criminals. And where Jesus forgives you and me. In so doing he opens up another way to live—not just in the world to come but in this world here and now. Truly this *is* a different kind of king, a king worthy of dominion and honor and praise, worthy of our allegiance and our glad and joyful hearts. He is the one we are invited to give our lives to until the kingdom does come in all of its full glory, on earth as it is in heaven.