

King of Kings and Lord of Lords

Luke 23:33-43

November 25, 2007

I.

You might be wondering why we just heard a reading about the crucifixion today. Isn't that part of Holy Week? Certainly, it is. But the crucifixion is not just something we think about only once a year. While it sets the stage for celebration of the resurrection on Easter Day, it also is inherent in the mysteries of God's kingdom that we regularly encounter as Christians.

And that's because without the crucifixion there would be no resurrection, and with no resurrection Jesus Christ could not come again in glory, and if he does not come again in glory then God's kingdom on earth would not finally be established. So the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior is central to our worship all the time, even though at some times the main focus is on something else.

We have come to the end of the church year. This is the last Sunday of Pentecost. During Pentecost, which began last June, we heard readings and sermons about Jesus as he walked among us and shared our humanity. These readings and sermons described the parables Jesus told, the miracles he performed, and his travels and experiences.

And from last June until today we did not hear much about Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, or ascension. Although we had prophetic glimpses of him as our Savior, most of the readings dealt with him as a preacher and teacher, and his work with the crowds and disciples.

Now, a new church year begins next Sunday, which is the first Sunday in Advent. And as we approach Advent, things start to change. We focus a little less on what Jesus did during his life, and we think a little more about who Jesus is as a person and our Lord and Savior. We begin in earnest next Sunday when the readings anticipate Jesus' coming again in glory at the end of history, and after that we move into the story of his birth two thousand years ago.

Today marks that transition. This Sunday is celebrated throughout Christendom as Christ the King Sunday. All of today's readings reflect this theme of Christ as king and life in God's kingdom.

The Collect described Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah told of the coming of a new shepherd who will reign as king and execute justice and righteousness. The Psalm proclaimed Old Testament prophecies of a mighty savior. Then the reading from Colossians spoke of how God has rescued us from the power of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.

Finally, the Gospel reading from Luke helps us tie it together. It shows what we mean as we understand Jesus Christ as king, and it confirms how his kingship is radically different from worldly ideas of what a king is or what a king might do.

II.

Let's try to imagine the scene described in the Gospel. Jesus was nailed to the cross, with a sign above his head proclaiming that he was the king of the Jews. That sign, however, was not a confession of faith and certainly is not evidence of Christ's heavenly kingship. His executioners were mocking him with that sign just as they did when they challenged him to come down off the cross. Our belief in Christ as our king is sustained by something else in today's reading.

And that something else is the exchange between Jesus and the criminal who came to faith on the cross. Somehow he knew who Jesus was. He asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus

came into his kingdom. He didn't ask to get off the cross, and indeed confessed that he deserved his fate. But that criminal understood something about the kingdom, and knew Jesus was the key. And Jesus recognized his faith and told him they would be together in Paradise.

Think about it. Confession, redemption, and salvation, all while being crucified. Under the most horrific and gruesome circumstances, Jesus demonstrated his eternal purpose, his heavenly power, and his love for humanity. A condemned criminal, sharing Jesus' earthly fate, also was given a share of eternal life.

That story reveals the nature of Jesus' kingship. It is a kingship that became evident on the cross, was confirmed in the resurrection, and exists today in the dwelling place of God in preparation for when he comes again to bring God's kingdom to all believers.

John's Gospel made this clear beyond all doubt when he described Jesus appearance before Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Jesus to die. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (Jn. 18:36).

III.

So when he said that his kingdom was not of this world, he was proclaiming that God's heavenly kingdom had now come to earth. And he was identifying himself with what Paul later would write in our reading from Colossians today. He was confirming that he would rescue us from darkness, give us to the light, and bring us into his kingdom where we would have redemption and forgiveness.

That's quite a statement. Do people believe it? Who do people think Jesus is, really? Do they regard him as the King of kings and Lord of lords as the Collect described him, or do they think of him in some other way?

I think it's safe to say Jesus was not crucified because he lived and spoke in earthly terms, but because he threatened earthly institutions with heavenly truths. All four Gospels show that he spoke about his messianic role for humanity; that he claimed a special relationship with God; that he took it upon himself to forgive the sins of others; and that he referred to himself as the Son of Man, which people of the time understood to be a divine title.

Then, when you consider that he raised the dead, healed the sick, and cast out demons, you have a picture of an extremely unique person that leads to an inescapable reality. And that reality is that you simply cannot regard Jesus as a great teacher or as a good man. He does not give us that option.

I have said before how C.S. Lewis made this point over sixty years ago in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*. He said then, and theologians have agreed with him since, that if Jesus were merely human he would have been regarded as egocentric, arrogant, or a fool. No mortal person could make the astonishing claims that Jesus made, and say the shocking things that he said, and then get away with just being called a great teacher or a good man.

This means that we can accept Jesus as who he claimed to be, or we can say that he was delusional or dishonest. There really are no other choices. Let's look at these options.

If we believe Scripture, we can accept as true what Jesus said and did, and we can acknowledge that he is indeed the King of kings and Lord of lords. That, however, is a lot more than just being a great teacher or a good man.

Or we can decide that Jesus was mistaken. We might conclude that Jesus actually thought that he was God but in reality he was not. This option, however, would compel the conclusion

that he was a megalomaniac, or was crazy, or a madman. History has had its share of people who thought they were gods, and no one ever thought they were great teachers or good men.

Or finally, we could say that Jesus was a deceiver. We might say that he knew that he was not God, yet he intentionally misled people in order to gain a following. That also is not the legacy of a great teacher or good man.

So, unless we reject just about everything we know about Jesus, the inescapable conclusion is that he is who he said he is. He is the king of our lives, and his kingdom comes from God. And as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, we do so knowing that our faith is grounded in the truth.

Or do we? Unfortunately our faith is not universally shared. Some people worry more about earthly consequences than heavenly truths. Others, when they hear Jesus say that his kingdom is not of this world might say, "Whew! That's a relief. It's just a spiritual thing. It doesn't affect real life."

But if we really do believe that Christ is the King and that his birth was the beginning of God's kingdom, then everything changes. In fact, if we do believe that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, then it has a greater claim over us than the systems and institutions of the world that we experience every day. If Christ is the King, then we clearly are called to follow him and to lead our lives in ways that prepare us for the reality of his kingdom.

IV.

So, here we are. This end of the church year brings us full circle. During the past year we walked with Christ through the Gospels, we shared the significance of the manger, and we heard about the calling of Peter, James, John and the others. We stood at the cross and renewed our eternal hope through our Lord's resurrection. We heard once again how the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples, and hopefully we were inspired by Jesus' teachings to the church he left behind.

And no matter how many times we come to this point, the stories never grow old. It seems there always is something new and exciting that strengthens and comforts us. And it has been that way for countless generations over two thousand years. How is such a thing possible? How can the greatest story ever told remain so new and vital and alive?

Jesus Christ is the answer. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and his kingdom comes to us from God. In the familiar language of our creeds we experience through him the means of grace of the hope of glory, and with him we look forward to the life of the world to come. *Amen.*