

C Christ the King 11.20.22

Luke 23:33-43

Focus Statement: Today, and every day, God is with us.

Let me paint a picture of a year for you. The world has just emerged, is still sort of emerging, from a worldwide global pandemic, a pandemic where nearly a third of the world's population was sickened and millions upon millions lost their lives. Supply chain issues and environmental degradation caused by human actions are causing inflation to spiral out of control. Economic inequality is rising, some seem to have so much, too much, while others have nothing. Racism, antisemitism, and persecution of -isms of every sort were rising as people looked for an "other" to blame. Politically, governments and institutions that had provided structure and stability for so long are looking weak, fractures are starting to show. New authoritarian leaders are emerging, wresting power with claims that they and they alone can save us, and the authorities we had trusted for so long seem entirely willing to hand over the reins of government to these untried and untrustworthy figures.

So, the question is, what year did I just paint a picture of? If your guess was, this one, you picked up on the similarities. However, the year I was describing was 1925. The global pandemic was the 1918 flu pandemic, the environmental degradation the fallout of World War One, the specific government in question turning over the reins of power to an untried and untrustworthy leader was the Italian King Victor Emmanuel III, handing power to Benito Mussolini and his fascists. A turnover Pope Pius XI watched from Vatican City following a march on Rome in October of 1922. Pope Pius instituted Christ the King Sunday in 1925 in an effort to try and get Christians to not buy into the promises made by

Mussolini, Hitler, and others, voices claiming for themselves almost divine authority to set things right, to remember where their true loyalties lie, who their real savior was. Who really not just could, but in fact already had, saved them. Christ the King Sunday is this effort to remind the people of Pope Pius's time, to remind us, that yes political leadership is important, we need good leaders. But the lens through which we evaluate those leaders is not how much pomp and swagger they bring to their leadership; it is how closely they model the ultimate model of authority, the one who is willing to give up his own life for his people.

Our text for this morning finds us, after a long summer and fall of journeying, at the cross. We knew this was where Jesus was headed, because he's told us, and now he is here. In the last place you would think to look for a king, dying the death of a political criminal, between two other criminals, on a cross on a hill outside the city. If death on a cross was not humiliation enough, the leaders, the soldiers, even one of the criminals being crucified beside him, were mocking him saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Messiah, God's chosen one" and "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" All this as he hung under a sign declaring his humiliation, this man, turned over by his own people, mocked and derided, captive of the Romans, "This is the King of the Jews."

This is a passage of boasting, demeaning, mockery, and humiliation. And in this passage, Jesus says two phrases. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" and "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” and “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Dear people of God, THAT is what leadership looks like, that is what authority looks like, that is what love looks like. The model of kingship in scripture is that of a shepherd king, a servant who sits with their people in the face of whatever trials and struggles they go through, who shoulders the pains and the hurts of their people, who protects them, cares for them, comforts them, guides them, like a mother hen tends to her chicks. Christ the King is, was, and always will be, totally and entirely dedicated to our well-being, who is willing to go to the ends of the earth and beyond, beyond even death itself, for us. Because that is what it means to be a leader.

To build this out a little more, let’s break down these two phrases of Jesus. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” The first question is, to whom is Jesus praying for forgiveness. The obvious answer is the Roman soldiers doing the crucifying. They don’t decide who live and dies, they just follow the orders they are given. But throughout Luke’s Gospel, and especially in the passages immediately leading up to this moment, the real power players have been the Jewish authorities, those with the most intimate knowledge of scripture, the most prepared to recognize Jesus’ claims of Sonship, who miss those claims in the fear of what they will mean for their own loss of power. And so from the cross, Jesus prayed for them, for how their fears let them miss what was in front of them, for Roman soldiers caught in a game not their making, and for all of us, for all the times we fall victim to the temptation of the promise of security, and prayed in the same words he taught his followers to pray, prayed in the same words we ourselves will pray in not too many minutes, “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

And this last one, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Note this is not what the criminal asked for, this is much much greater. The criminal asked that he be remembered; that Jesus not come into his kingdom and forget the man who died beside him. Jesus instead promised not a far off someday, but that in fact that day, today, the man would dine with Jesus at the great banquet feast described in the parable, would rest like Lazarus who died at the rich man's gate and awoke at the bosom of Abraham. This is the promise that, without question, doubt or hesitation, no matter where you are, what has happened, what struggles you face, there too is God. In it with you, offering glimpses of the holy so that you know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there is nowhere you could ever go where God is not. Because earthly kings rise and fall, but God is with God's people from before there was anything to after the end of everything, and for every single moment in between. Dear people of God, to steal a line from a commentary I read this week, from Karoline Lewis, one of my favorite preachers, Christ the King Sunday is this declaration that: "Christ's reign reaches beyond what we see; beyond our now; even beyond our tomorrows. Christ's reign, above all, is like the dawn from on high that breaks upon us, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guiding our feet into the way of peace." Thanks be to God who is, who was, and who always will be. Amen.