

November 23, 2025—The Last Sunday after Pentecost (Christ the King)
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If You Are the King

It is kind of amazing to me that to almost everyone in our Gospel passage this morning, it is perfectly obvious that Jesus is *not* the King of the Jews. All of them throw those words around — king of the Jews, the Messiah of God—and to be clear, that’s the same thing; the word “Messiah” means “anointed one,” in the same way that Samuel anointed Saul and then anointed David, in the same way that every king in David’s line was anointed by priests and prophets. And the word “Christ” is just a Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” So all of them talk about a king, and almost all of them don’t believe for a second that those words can be applied to Jesus in anything but a cruel and mocking sense. It’s obvious that he is not the king of the Jews, he is not the Messiah of God, for one simple reason: he’s dying on a cross. Which is just not what kings do.

What a king would do, what the Messiah would do, as they all say, is that a king would save himself. Which is to say, he’d fight back. He’d stand up to the Roman soldiers, and his courage and his trust in God would be so great that God would deliver him from the hands of all his enemies. As our Psalm this morning says, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Ps. 46:4)

In Morning Prayer this past week we’ve been reading—with some chagrin—the first book of Maccabees, which is the story of how Judas Maccabeus stood up to the armies of the Greco-Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes and won battles against overwhelming odds because God was on his side. And the Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories like that—stories of armies who triumph over more powerful foes because God is on their side. God brought the walls of Jericho down for Joshua. God guided the sling stone of little David to bring down Goliath. And so on and on. The leaders of the people in our Gospel lesson—who scoffed at Jesus, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one!”—they knew all those stories. And they knew that Jesus couldn’t be a king because his story was ending in a very different way. I think the Romans actually knew those stories, too, or at least they had figured out that these people who were constantly in a state of revolt expected that kind of king. So their mockery has an extra sort of edge to it: they want to show all the uppity people of Judea that this is what happens to their so-called kings: the worst death you can imagine, hanging from a set of iron nails.

So the reason I said we’ve been reading 1 Maccabees “with some chagrin” is that those readings come on the heels of a long season of reading our way through 1 and 2 Kings, with bits of Jeremiah and Ezra and Nehemiah thrown in, and we’ve been hearing a lot about war. A lot about kings fighting other kings, and a lot about which side of these conflicts God was or was not on. And at the end of 2 Kings, we read the historical context for our reading from Jeremiah this morning—the chronicle of the last kings of Judah who reigned in the years before the armies of Babylon came in and sacked Jerusalem and took its people into exile. Kings like Josiah, who expanded the kingdom of Judah and tried to get rid of the worship of foreign gods and died in battle against Egyptian forces. (2 Kings 23: 29) Josiah was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz, who reigned all of three months before he was taken into captivity in Egypt and replaced by a different son of Josiah, Jehoiakim, who was installed by the Egyptian Pharaoh as a sort of puppet king. (2 Kings 23:31–34) Then Jehoiakim turned around and became the servant of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon for three years, and then, 2 Kings says, “rebelled against him.” (2 Kings 24:1) So basically, the kingdom of Judah was trapped between these two great world powers, Babylon and Egypt, and kept choosing one side or another. More importantly, the kings kept choosing war even against the powerful armies of these empires, because they knew the same stories. These were descendants of David! And if David could bring down Goliath, because God was on his side, then maybe Jehoiakim could bring down Nebuchadnezzar, too. Because, after all, that’s what kings do. But they failed, of course—but 2 Kings tells us that they failed not because they were choosing war against overwhelming

enemy forces but because they “did what was wicked in the sight of God, as all their ancestors had done.”

So when Jeremiah brings the word of God to “the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture” (Jeremiah 23:1), he’s talking about those kings. Ever since the shepherd boy David, the kings of Israel and Judah imagined themselves as the shepherds of God’s people, charged to lead and protect them. But these kings, Josiah and Jehoiakim and all the rest chose war and rebellion, causing God’s sheep, God’s beloved people, to be destroyed and scattered.

So that’s the context in which God, through Jeremiah, promises a good shepherd, a righteous Branch from the family tree of David, a king who will “deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land.” (Jeremiah 23:6) Promises like this are the reason why people in Jesus’ time expected a Messiah. They’re the reason that people called Jesus “Son of David.” The irony is that for Jesus to live up to their idea of what a king should be, he would have had to become like one of Jeremiah’s bad shepherds, choosing war and rebellion against the overwhelming forces of Rome which could only lead to the scattering of God’s flock.

So that brings me around to the one person in our Gospel reading who maybe gets it. The one person who wants no part of all this mockery. The one person who doesn’t call Jesus the king or the Messiah but points to the real kingdom where Jesus reigns, when he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” It doesn’t sound like he’s expecting Jesus to come down off the cross and rise up against Rome and establish a new kingdom of Israel on earth. I think he knows that Jesus is going to die soon, within the next few hours, just like he himself is going to die. And still he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And I don’t know why this criminal or insurrectionist or thief or whatever he was hanging on the cross next to Jesus is the only one in this reading who gets it. I don’t know how he knows that Jesus is innocent and doesn’t deserve the torment he’s experiencing. I don’t know how he understands the kingdom Jesus is coming into. But he does. And because he does, he has become for us an unlikely example of faith, a nameless saint whose trust in the mercy of the crucified king is a model for us all.

He’s a model for us because he understands that the way of Jesus, the Messiah of God, is not the way of an earthly king: it is not the way of war. His kingdom is not of this world, and it’s not a kingdom of domination, of the strong lording it over the weak. And it’s not a kingdom that can be identified with any earthly nation.

It’s so important for us to remember that, especially now. When Pope Pius XI instituted the feast of Christ the King to be observed on the last Sunday after Pentecost in 1925, it was a way to protest and counteract the rise of fascism in Spain and Italy in the buildup to World War II. And now, a hundred years later, we need to remember why we observe this day, as the heresy of Christian Nationalism continues to grow in power and popularity. I call it a heresy, and I don’t use that term lightly. A theology that equates the kingdom of God with a very particular vision of America—an America dominated by conservative white Christians—is antithetical to the Gospel of Christ. Because what they’re teaching is that the resurrected Christ is now doing exactly what all those people who mocked him on the cross thought a king should do: save himself and rule the world and trample his enemies under his feet, with God on his side.

That is a theology that comes from “the power of darkness,” in the words of Colossians (Col. 1:13), not from the work of God. Through Christ, we have been “transferred” into Christ’s kingdom—we are citizens of heaven, and that is where our first allegiance belongs. And yes, we are called to do all we can to help that kingdom of God bubble up and break through into this world, so that the love and mercy and forgiveness that Jesus displayed on the cross can be made manifest throughout this hurting world. But we can never forget what kind of kingdom it is.

The kingdom of God is built on kinship and community, on love and forgiveness, on humility and mutual service. It’s a kingdom where “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves,” in Jesus’ own words. (Luke 22:26) It’s a kingdom that belongs to the poor, to little children, and to repentant sinners like the criminal dying on the cross beside his crucified king.

Following the example of that nameless saint, may we recognize divinity not in power and warfare, but in peace, in mercy and forgiveness, and in the presence of a God who shares our suffering, even unto death. And in the hour of our death, may we, like him, be with Jesus in Paradise.

Amen.