

Thy Kingdom Come

Luke 23:33-43

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I was fortunate enough, when I was a little girl, to get to go visit my aunt who was at the time working with a non-governmental organization doing public health work in Kenya. I traveled with my grandmother, and because it was a very long journey and I was little (and my grandmother was no spring chicken), everyone decided it would be for the best if we broke each leg of the journey into two – and so on the way there and on the way back, we had layovers of just over a day in London.

My grandmother planned activities that would catch the fancy of a jetlagged seven-year-old girl. We made a trip to Windsor Castle, where there is a very elaborate and enormous dollhouse that is a tourist attraction in and of itself. We had a fancy high tea with finger sandwiches and scones. And we saw the Crown Jewels, housed in the Tower of London. The Crown Jewels are ceremonial objects of the United Kingdom – vestments and regalia for coronations. Swords, scepters, crowns, and robes. Objects used for the baptisms of royal children and the anointing of monarchs. The Crown Jewels are a dazzling sight – rich velvets and more gold than you could imagine. Items crusted with diamonds and precious stones. I used some of my allowance money to buy a souvenir book full of pictures of the various items and descriptions of their history and uses and distinctive characteristics, and would pore over the beautiful pictures of magnificent objects.

We Americans have no king, but that's what I think of when I hear talk of kings and of royalty – that kind of splendor and wealth and awe-inducing pomp and circumstance.

On this Sunday, which we recognize as Christ the King Sunday, wouldn't you expect to hear about Christ's majesty and splendor? Maybe something about a throne? Something about might and power? But our scripture today reminds us that it is much more complicated than that to say that Christ is King.

We seldom read in church from the story of Christ's crucifixion, outside of the Holy Week services that lead up to Easter, but today our text highlights the paradoxical nature of Christ's kingship by taking us straight into the darkness of Good Friday. Hanging on the cross, Jesus is scoffed at by the religious authorities, who say "If he is the Messiah, let him save himself." He is mocked by the soldiers, who say "Save yourself, if you are King of the Jews," and hang an inscription over him sarcastically labeling him "King of the Jews." Even another man being crucified mocks and derides him. But the one on the other side stops the man short – "we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but he has done nothing wrong," he says, and then addresses Jesus: "remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

This is a day when we declare that Christ is king. And on this day we come face to face that Christ is a kind of king unlike any this world has seen. He is not a king like the monarchs of England, with their sumptuous crown jewels, vast wealth, and carefully cultivated public image. He is not a king like Caesar, ruling with an iron fist, instilling fear, wringing resources from the people and land under his dominion to enrich the empire at the expense of its poorest. He is a king whose reign is inextricable from his choice to give up earthly power, to endure suffering

and death, to be absolutely true to the end to a vision that places love and mercy and forgiveness at the very center of everything.

We pray each week “thy kingdom come,” praying for the day when Christ will reign over all, overturning the ways of this world and bringing to fruition all of God’s promises. And we remember that we who are Christian believe that we are citizens of the Kingdom of God first and foremost. We believe that our allegiance to God – and God’s faithfulness to us – is the single most important commitment in our lives. More important than patriotism, more important than family, more important than work or money, more important than any passion or hobby or membership or allegiance. The observance of Christ the King was eagerly adopted by Protestants, but it started as a Roman Catholic observance which spread because the church saw the merit in having a day where we emphasize the Reign of Christ. And in the letter that introduced this observance, Pope Pius XI wrote about the idea that there is no part of our lives nor any aspect of ourselves which falls outside of Christ’s dominion. If Christ is King, then he is king over minds and hearts, bodies and souls. We remember on this day that if Christ is King, then all earthly powers – all kingdoms and republics, all states and commonwealths, are subject to Christ. That is the kingdom in which we are citizens.

When we stop and think about it, there is something a bit terrifying about holding as king this one who gave up his crown in favor of a cross. It would be easier, or at any rate, less frightening, to follow a king who promised wealth and power and riches and ease. But the king we follow is not like that – he teaches and leads us in a way of setting down earthly power, sitting down at tables with people who are hated and ignored, kneeling to wash the feet of his followers, and dying on a cross rather than choosing a path of violence and insurrection. The king we follow

shows us by example that God's logic turns this world's logic on its head, showing us the power in vulnerability, and the new life that comes out of death.

On Christ the King Sunday, we are invited to remember that we are citizens of that kind of kingdom, and to wonder what we can do to more fully align ourselves with our humble king. I'm reminded of a memoir I read years ago, one that motivated me along my path to ministry – a book called *Not All of Us Are Saints*. It was the story of a doctor who, having done very well in all his medical training, decided not to take a well-paid position in his midwestern home, but instead to pursue a career providing medical care to those living in extreme poverty in Washington, D.C. In the late 80s and early 90s, when he could have been working predictable and well-compensated office hours in a wealthy suburb, he instead devoted his life and practice to providing medical care to homeless AIDS patients, people living in extreme poverty; he wrote about the rude awakening of realizing that the proper nutrition and good sleep that his patients needed was unavailable to them because of their conditions of their lives, the sense of call that led him to that work, and the transformation he found there. It's been years since I read it, and most of the stories and details are lost to me, but I remember reading it in college, and being struck by how this man's Christian faith had lead him to deviate from the path everyone expected of him. Our world tells us that we should always choose to seek more power, more status, more wealth, more ease. But with many doors open to him, this doctor felt the pull of vocation, the certainty that caring for the indigent was where he would find Christ, where he could best be a citizen of the kingdom of God.

In our daily mundane choices and our big, life-changing choices, we always have the option to follow the kings of this world, to choose values like wealth and ease and power and popularity, or to choose the harder and more rewarding path – the path that aligns us with the kingdom of

the Christ who chose sacrificial love; the path that puts the marginalized at the center; the path that values grace and mercy.

There may not be crown jewels in the kingdom of God – or if there are, they may not be crusted with diamonds and plated with gold. Because it is a different kind of kingdom entirely. Perhaps if we toured the crown jewels of Christ’s kingdom, instead of finery and precious stones, we would see there a basin and a pitcher – simple, but made with love – for washing feet. Perhaps we would see sandals that were worn until there was almost nothing left, from the long journeys to spread the good news. Maybe a wooden bucket from a well in Samaria, where Jesus promised living water. Perhaps we would see a cup and a plate, probably nothing too fancy, just pottery, but shared with such love, and the words “this is my body, this is my blood, do this in memory of me.” The crown jewels of the kingdom of God may not look like anything special. But they would shine with the love of God who took on flesh to dwell with us, who reigns with the power of sacrificial love, who looks at each of us and delights in these beautiful children called to follow Christ the King.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.