

CHRIST THE KING
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in Brookfield, Connecticut
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Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Luke 23:33-43

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Today is Christ the King Sunday, which is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week, we turn the page on the church calendar, and instead of following Luke's gospel, we start following Matthew. So what is Christ the King about, and why does it fall where it

does? I did some digging this week and found out it's actually a relatively recent thing, and it was a response to a specific historical moment.

Back in 1925, as Europe was falling into the hands of dictators like Mussolini, Pope Pius XI instituted a special feast day he called, "The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe"—which is kind of a mouthful, so it quickly got shortened to Christ the King. The purpose of the feast day was to assert Jesus' dominion over all creation and to highlight the peaceful nature of his reign. *Jesus is the one who rules our lives, and he does so, not through violence and intimidation, but by virtue of his divine nature—by virtue of the fact that he and God are one.* That's what Pius was trying to say.

I also found out that Christ the King was originally observed on the last Sunday of October. But then, in 1970, Pope Paul VI moved it to the last Sunday of the year because it points toward the second coming of Christ and the arrival of God's kingdom, and he wanted to end the year on that note of anticipation.

Today, Christ the King is celebrated not only by Catholics, but by Protestants, as well, including Presbyterians. And in a world that's driven by consumerism, it serves as a reminder to worshippers who are already thinking about Christmas that Christmas is about much more than going out and buying a bunch of stuff; it's about a sovereign Lord who came to be the "Prince of Peace" and to show us how much we're loved.

So from the beginning, Christ the King has had a certain tension built into it. It represents a total rejection of all the forces that try to claim our allegiance—whether they're political forces, or social forces, or economic forces, or whatever. Christ the King draws a sharp line between Jesus and the kinds of rulers Jeremiah condemns in the first reading: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord... It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away..." Jesus is the opposite of those wicked shepherds. He doesn't destroy, scatter, or divide. He heals, gathers, and unites. He's like the righteous Branch Jeremiah goes on to describe: "he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

That's the message of Christ the King, and we hear it in the second reading today, as well. Jesus is hanging on the cross, condemned by an authoritarian regime. And what do we see him doing? We see him praying for the soldiers who put him up there; and we see him offering mercy to one of the criminals crucified alongside him, saying, "today you will be with me in Paradise."

In the aftermath of World War I, Pope Pius noted that while the fighting had ended, there was still no true peace. He pointed to the rise of class divisions and unbridled nationalism, and he argued that true peace can only be found under the kingship of Christ. "Jesus Christ reigns over the minds of individuals," he wrote, "by His teachings, in their hearts by His love, in each one's life by the living according to His law and the imitating of His example." He wanted Christ the King to inspire the laity, and he continued, "The faithful... by meditating upon these

truths, will gain much strength and courage, enabling them to form their lives after the true Christian ideal... He must reign in our minds... in our wills... [and] in our hearts..."

Given the state of the world today, it seems like we need Christ the King as much as ever. We need to spend at least one Sunday a year pondering the question, *What kind of king is Jesus? What's the nature of his reign?*

When you enter Bath Abbey in England, among all the visitor information you'll find a brochure that offers what I think is one of the best answers to that question that I've ever heard. It reads:

"Jesus was born in an obscure Middle Eastern town called Bethlehem, over 2000 years ago. During his first 30 years, he shared the daily life and work of an ordinary home. For the next three years, he went about teaching people about God and healing sick people by the shores of Lake Galilee. He called 12 ordinary men to be his helpers.

"He had no money. He wrote no books. He commanded no army. He wielded no political power. During his life, he never travelled more than 200 miles in any direction. He was executed by being nailed to a cross at the age of 33.

"Today, nearly 2 billion people throughout the world worship Jesus as divine—the Son of God. Their experience has convinced them that in the wonders of nature we see God as our loving Father; in the person of Jesus, we discover God as Son; and in our daily lives, we encounter this same God as Spirit. Jesus is our way to finding God: we learn about Jesus by reading the Bible, particularly the New Testament, and we meet him directly in our spiritual experience.

"Jesus taught us to trust in a loving and merciful Father and to pray to him in faith for all our needs. He taught that we are all infinitely precious, children of one heavenly Father, and that we should therefore treat one another with love, respect, and forgiveness. He lived out what he taught by caring for those he met; by healing the sick—a sign of God's love at work; and by forgiving those who put him to death.

"Jesus' actions alone would not have led him to a criminal's death on the cross: but his teaching challenged the religious and moral beliefs of his day. People believed, and do to this day, that he can lead us to a full experience of God's love and compassion. Above all, he pointed to his death as God's appointed means of bringing self-centered people back to God. Jesus also foretold that he would be raised to life again three days after his death. When, three days after he had died on the cross, his followers did indeed meet him alive again; frightened and defeated women and men became fearless and joyful messengers.

"Their message of the Good News about Jesus is the reason Bath Abbey exists. More importantly, it is the reason why all over the world there are Christians who know what it means to meet the living Jesus, and believe that He can lead us all to heal and repair a

broken world. May your time in Bath Abbey be a blessing to you, and also to us in the church.”

That’s the kind of king Jesus is, that’s the nature of his reign, and that’s why we’re here, not only today but everyday—to do as he did: to heal, gather, and unite; to be a blessing to the earth, and everything in it; and to declare with one voice that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of our lives. Amen.