

Sermon Notes - November 20, 2022

“Living for Christ the King”

(Luke 23:32-43)

In 1925, Pope Pius XI made a decision that this Sunday would be called, “Christ the King Sunday.” In many churches it is still observed today, and some call it the “Reign of Christ.” He said, “This is Christ’s world no matter what any dictator thinks.” At that time, Mussolini had been in power in Italy for three years and Adolph Hitler was rising in power as the leader of the fledgling Nazi party. But, this Pope had the audacity to declare that Christ is King and we his subjects as Christians owe our ultimate loyalty to him. You think, “Miss Peggy, this Thursday is Thanksgiving. We’re getting ready to talk about the birth of Jesus. Why in the world are we talking about the cross now?” Well, it’s the last Sunday of the church year. You know, last Christmas we talked about the birth of the Savior; Easter, we talked about his resurrection; Pentecost, we talked about the giving of the Holy Spirit, the birth of the church, and all between then, we were talking about Jesus’ parables and his healing miracles. We’ve talked about his life in ministry, forgiveness, love, generosity, and gratitude. Today, we talk about what he did for us, how he is our king, and how our ultimate loyalty belongs to him. He showed his love in allegiance to us through his life, his death, and his resurrection. We show our allegiance and love for him through how we live.

I want you to look for just a few moments at what happened that day when Jesus was crucified. In our gospel lesson, it said he was crucified between two thieves. What an interesting way for a king to die, right? He died between two thieves. But, isn’t that who Jesus came to save – all of us as sinners? What more appropriate way and place for him to die than between two thieves. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus told the disciples and the crowds gathered around him – “I came to seek and save that which is lost.” In Mark’s gospel, he said, “The well don’t need a physician – only those who are sick.” Jesus came to save sinners, and he died between two sinners. I want you to notice that we also helped hang him there because we are all sinners. (*Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”*) But, he hung there between two criminals, and I think

it's appropriate because he wanted us to know that's the people whom he came to save were sinners.

I want you to notice something else in that story. Even on the cross, Jesus said a prayer out loud. He could've whispered and God would've heard him. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Who was he praying for? ... The soldiers who had mocked him, jeered him, and made fun of him for being "The King of the Jews" -- "Go save yourself if you are the King of the Jews" -- The ones who pushed the crown of thorns on his head; the ones who stripped him and cast lots for his garments; the ones who nailed him to the cross? "Father, forgive them for they don't know who I am." How about the religious leaders who instigated the crucifixion -- accused Jesus of blasphemy and being a traitor and trying to rival with Emperor Caesar as king? Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." How about the crowds that were there? They said, "He saved others! Let him save himself if he's the Messiah - the chosen one." And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." I wonder if Jesus said that prayer out loud not only for the people of that day, but knowing that one day his words would be recorded so that we would all know his forgiveness. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He was forgiving everyone - whoever's acted out in cruelty, lashed out in anger, hurt somebody and caused them pain.

Then, I want you to notice that he made a promise on the cross. There were two thieves, and one made fun of Jesus. The one thief rebuked Jesus and said, "If you're the Messiah, get yourself down and save us." The other one said to the other thief, "Don't you fear God? This man, this Jesus, has done nothing wrong. We're getting what we deserve - hanging on this cross. He's done nothing wrong." Can't you imagine straining with all his might to breathe, to lift up his head, his voice and say, "Jesus, when you come in your kingdom, remember me." You see, here was a man who was a professional criminal. In Matthew and Mark's gospel, it calls these men thieves. In Luke's gospel, he calls them criminals. Now, the proper scholarly correction of that is they were professional criminals - they were thugs; they were hoods; they had been that way their entire lives. Here's a thief who probably hasn't heard

about the virgin birth of Jesus, or seen him raise Lazarus from the dead, or heard him teach or heal people. He's been too busy in crime. But, even on the cross that day, he recognized who Jesus was - that he was somebody different. Somehow within his spirit, he knew and believed. He said to the other thief, "Don't you fear God? We're getting ready to die. This is the one they call, 'the Messiah.' When you come into your kingdom, Jesus, remember me." Jesus made a promise to him. **He said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."** Paradise is sometimes translated into "the Garden of Eden" -- it was believed to be a place of beauty, love, justice, peace, and wholeness. Ancient Jewish theologians translated it to be "an eternal place of bliss for Christians." Most scholars believe that when Jesus said this that day, he was saying to the thief: "Today, you'll be in the presence of God." I want you to know that Jesus gave that promise to us. When we die, we pass from this life into the presence of Almighty God. We'll wake up in his loving arms - that's his promise to us.

Jesus was not a self-serving king. He was self-sacrificing. He didn't rule by force, intimidation, control, and manipulation of people. He ruled in the power of love. He died and was resurrected because he loved us. He was a different kind of king and they didn't see it. Sometimes, we don't see it. But, when he died and was resurrected, he taught us that love wins out over sin and death.

I want you to see on the cross that as Jesus was dying, he was still forgiving others and teaching us to forgive our enemies - those who had hurled insults at him; those who didn't believe in him; those who hated him; those who had beat him and tortured him. He was still forgiving his enemies even on the cross - being compassionate and merciful. And, he even saved a repentant thief on the cross. "Today, you'll be with me in paradise."

Jesus calls us to show our loyalty to him. He's already proved his loyalty and love to us through his life, his death, and his resurrection. And, now he calls us to show it to him by how we live. When we believe in him and God's spirit comes to live within us, God works a new thing within us. He wants to make us more generous, more grateful. He wants to make us more merciful and compassionate and forgiving.

That's our challenge - to show the world that we are loyal subjects of Christ by the way we live - being more forgiving; merciful when people don't deserve it; compassionate; loving; gracious; grateful.

I want to read you something that a man wrote to a group of inmates in a prison chapel in South Africa. This is what he said about Jesus:

You think you had it rough as a kid. This guy was born in a barn. His first bed was a feeding trough. He was even two years old and people were trying to kill him. He had to hide out with his mom and dad on the run, and he was just a baby. That went on his entire life. Folks were always plotting to kill him and eventually, they did. Did you grow up being laughed at and kicked around? Imagine Jesus hearing the laughs about his mom being pregnant before she was married or getting teased or spit at from other kids because of it. Did you grow up without a father or mother - maybe because of divorce or death or maybe one parent walked out on you? You know Joseph is never mentioned (Jesus' father) after Jesus was age 12. Nobody knows for sure what happened to him, but most scholars figured that he must have died when Jesus was a kid. Yeah guys, Jesus knows that heartbreak. Imagine him standing at his father's grave and as the oldest son, he'd have to carry on and support the family. See him in his dad's workshop that first day, reaching for his father's tools, tears streaming down his face and he was just a kid. Ever had no place to sleep? Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." He even knows what it's like to have no place to live - sleeping around campfires or on people's floors. Friends ever run out on you? Jesus had a couple of those - Judas, Peter, and the disciples. Ever had anyone to beat you, torture you, strip you, and nail you to a cross? Jesus knows what that's like, too. He knows every struggle and every heartache you've ever faced - not just because he's God and God knows everything, but because he was a man. He went through the same things that you and I go through and more. He knows because he lived it. And he went on to die on a cross for all sinners, including you and me because he loved us that much. But on the third day, he rose winning the victory over sin and death because love triumphed -- God's love.

Here's the amazing thing: he did it for you and me. No wonder we celebrate "Christ the King Day." We owe him our allegiance. He's already proved his through his life, death, and resurrection. We prove ours by the way we live. May God help us to be loyal subjects to the one who gave his life for us. Amen.