**Luke 23:33,35-43** November 20, 2016

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*Luke 23:33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him…*

*35The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” 36The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”*

*38There was a written notice above him, which read: This Is The King Of The Jews.*

*39One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

*40But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*

*42Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

*43Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Can This Be a King?**

Pastors should avoid talking about politics. One reason is that if pastors routinely speak of politics, it will endanger a church’s tax status as a religious organization. But really, that isn’t a very good reason.

A better reason is that if pastors were to take sides in politics, they would unavoidably offend some people. And that would be putting up a man-made barrier between people and God.

There is another reason, far and away the best reason of all that pastors avoid talking about politics from the pulpit, or in the fellowship hall in Bible class, or generally even in private conversations. But that will be later.

This much I can say about politics: It has been the duty of Christians in every election since 1789—to honor the elected president as God’s representative in earthly political power. Sometimes, when we look at leaders, we have doubts. We doubt because we expect a certain demeanor, a certain look. And if a leader doesn’t in some way match our expectations, then we have difficulty accepting him.

**I. The Kind of King He Is**

Of whom could that have been more true than of Jesus in this reading for Christ the King Sunday. In Luke 23, if there is one thing Jesus does not look like, he does not look like a king. Then why this reading?

I could always use the excuse that somebody else chose the reading—because someone else did. In the Lutheran Church we follow assigned readings in our Sunday services. Those schedules are in the front of your hymnals, about page 163 or so. These assigned readings are called lectionaries or pericopes. One reason we follow lectionaries is that they give *you* a variety and a full picture of Scripture. If we preachers chose our own readings every week, you would find out that we have our pet peeves and pet projects. We would talk too much about some parts of the Bible and completely overlook others. The lectionary makes us wrestle with topics we might prefer to avoid! Another reason for lectionaries is that they make a pastor’s job easier. I don’t have to comb the Bible and find readings every week. I don’t have to re-invent the wheel.

Now when you rely on other people to do the job, you know that they will sometimes surprise you, and usually pleasantly so. But today’s reading? Luke 23 on Christ the King Sunday? If there is any reading in the Bible where Jesus does *not* look like a king, this is it.

It is about the ugliest scene in the Bible. I hope that I will not disappoint you when I don’t go into the gory details. Jesus is my friend, my brother and my Savior. And to go into detail about his suffering and death, for me, would be like going into detail about a family member who was the victim of a violent shameful crime.

And so let me simply say this: the Roman method of execution called crucifixion was meant to shame and degrade. Crucifixion was execution by torture, but not in some hidden execution chamber. The Romans made it into a public spectacle by putting up the crosses on highly trafficked public roads. This gave rise to the custom, as other ancient writings tell us, that the passers-by and the victims on the crosses would often engage in bitter shouting and cursing matches, hurling the most vile language at one other. And it played out in Luke 23 where humanity is displayed at its worst.

Living it out is Christ our King. That’s what the sign over his head said, wasn’t it? That sign was not meant to give him honor. It was meant to dishonor Jesus, to belittle him as much as possible. It was an impossibly cruel joke. It was the goal of the Romans through that sign to belittle the entire Jewish nation who called themselves God’s people. The Roman governor was saying, “Yes, you Jews, this is someone worthy of being called your king.” The shame of a nation laid on him.

But it wasn’t just his death. Even his life hadn’t looked like a king’s life. At the peak of his popularity with thousands following him. Even when there was a group of wealthy people following and funding his ministry (you can read about that in Luke 8:1-3), he set up no capital, built no palace, established no autonomous region – nor did he even try! He himself said, *“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head.”* (Mt 8:20). That is not how kings live.

And he had this way of offending people. He used a whip to clear the temple of merchants and money-changers, who were in cahoots with the high priests. He spoke scathing criticisms of the religious leaders. He even had hard words for his own disciples. Do you remember to whom he said, “Out of my sight, Satan”? It was a disciple, not an enemy. Whom did he repeatedly call, “Oh, you of little faith”? Again, not enemies but his followers.

No wonder he ended up on a cross. His political instincts were completely wrong. If you want to be king you have to know how to get people on your side, flatter them, meet them halfway, say what they want to hear, promise the good and the easy. No wonder he ends up on a cross. He has no idea how to be a king!

And yet when you, when you fellow Christian, look at this cross, you still see a king, don’t you! You still see a king.

In this world we usually have to settle for leaders who have a healthy amount of self-interest in their ambitions. And so we put up with their arrogance, their wealth-seeking, their power-seeking. But Jesus is a different kind of king. Those who mocked Jesus spoke the truth—though they didn’t know it—when they said, ***“He saved others, but he can’t save himself!”*** [Matthew wording] That is what makes him a king. He dies to save others, instead of demanding that others die for him. He chose to not save himself.

His suffering and death is no mere symbol of how we should live. Jesus Christ went to the cross to suffer for our sins, to save us. He chose those nails, he chose to stay there until his death, to save us from hell’s pain. He chose the pain, so that all the people of the world would be forgiven.

Who doesn’t love a king willing to do that? A king, a leader who truly puts his people before himself. Who not only talks the talk but walks the walk. Who even suffers death so they can live. Yes, this one, the one dying, mocked, insulted, abandoned on an instrument of death, he is our king!

**II. The Kind of Followers He Has**

But wait. There is a another reason Jesus doesn’t look like a king. It’s his followers.

A couple months ago we were visited by a musician of our fellowship, Chris Driesbach. Many enjoyed the music and the message he brought us. It was a good day, a good worship service. He has a track – not one he played that Sunday, but on one of his CDs – he has a track titled “Diversity.” It might sound a little uncomplimentary:

*“I go to church with all kinds of people, they’re all so different from me. Bunch of folks with all kinds of problems like autism and bankruptcy, bad feet, Alzheimer’s, too [strange], too short, divorced, alcoholic, about to die. I know God put us all here together, but sometimes I wonder why. Maybe we’re like his pet collection of personality disorders…”*

And is that not what we see at the cross of Jesus? Of those around the cross, whom does Christ the King claim as his subject? Is it the strong, the influential, the wealthy, the clever, the smart? No. All of them are mocking him. Jesus claims none of them. In our reading there was only one true subject of Christ the King. He was a criminal, a criminal guilty of a capital crime. If Jesus is the king of people like that, do we want to associate with them?

Recently another songwriter passed away. He wasn’t a Christian, but he at least seemed to understand a little bit of what Christians are trying to say. He wrote something true and beautiful about Jesus, “He knew only drowning men could see him.” That is the truth about our King—only drowning men can see him.

The criminal on the cross next to Jesus was a drowning man. All the others thought they could swim. They were certain of their own right-ness, their own righteousness, their own abilities, or the unfairness of life. But not this one crucified with Jesus. He confessed, ***“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve… Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** (41-42).

Drowning, drowning, life ebbing away, but by God’s grace he saw Jesus for the king he is. And with a heart that is starting to learn the heavenly language of undeserved love, he reaches out, not promising to do better or to make up, but to simply make a request for something he knows he doesn’t deserve, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”***

We, too, only know Jesus truly as our king when we realize that we are drowning. Whether on a cross, or sitting in a chair, or standing in a church, or lying in bed, or driving our car, whenever we come in fear and acknowledgement of our hopelessness, then we have rightly understood Christ as our king. When we confess, “Dear Jesus, I have failed you, I have failed my fellow man, I have failed myself. I have failed to lead my family in true worship. I have failed to set aside time for you on a weekly and a daily basis. I have failed to do what you would have me do for my friends, for my enemies. I have left undone the many things you want me to do. And I have done a great many things you have forbidden. And even when I do what you want, how often is it not half-hearted and begrudging? Lord, even if I were lifted high on a cross suffering for my own sins, I would still be drowning. Jesus, remember me.” For you, Christ really is your king.

And your king looks at you and promises, ***“You will be with me in paradise.”*** You see, Jesus does not prize the sort of person that the world prizes – the self-assured, the self-righteous. But he *does* want us to be confident, confident in him, our king. He promises, ***“I tell you the truth, you will be with me in paradise.”*** And we can rest content, even if we were to find ourselves dying on a cross. We would be his.

Oh yes, what is the best reason that I don’t talk about politics in my role as a pastor? Because Jesus doesn’t. Do you know how often Jesus talked about politics? It amounted to one sentence: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God’s.” And if ever there was someone who could complained how his country had gone down the tubes, Jesus could have. If anyone wanted to complain about the influence foreigners had in his country, Jesus could have under the Roman occupation. If anyone could have talked about human rights’ abuses, a man tortured to death by crucifixion on trumped up charges of non-existent faults, Jesus could have. But there on the cross he is talking about the only thing that matters – *eternal* life.

That is why the Church has to stay out of politics. Don’t misunderstand me. Christians can and should be there. But not the Church. Because like Jesus, the Church with a capital “C” exists not for this world but for the next—just as Christ is truly The King, not of this world but the next.

Yes, look at Jesus. Look at what he does for his people. He is really a king, a real king. Look at the one subject he claims in these verses at the cross. And you will realize that even in your weakest, most embarrassed, most shameful moment, that he claims every single person who turns their eyes to him in faith. Look at the cross and you learn much of Christ the King and who he is pleased to call his subjects. Amen.