

What Kind of King?

Before we hear God's Word in Luke's Gospel this morning, may I share some thoughts with you?

This year is winding down. The year is coming to an end. Oh yes, it's true that according to the *world's* method of keeping time, we still have more than a month to go until December thirty-first, the last day of twenty-sixteen. But the church measures time on a calendar different from the world's schedule. And today is the final Sunday of the church year. The church year culminates in Christ the King Sunday. This is a day for reflecting on what it means to be a king. And on what it means to *have* a king.

Here in the United States, we're not as familiar with kings as are the people of some other nations. Because we don't have a monarch. We declared our independence from England, which eventually became our closest ally. The United Kingdom, as its name suggests, is a constitutional monarchy. For nearly sixty-five years, Queen Elizabeth the Second has

performed her royal duties with decorum and dignity, with diligence and dedication.

Like the United Kingdom today, ancient Israel had a popular ruler. King David came to the throne after slaying the Philistine giant. Mighty in battle, David vanquished all of Israel's foes. The country united behind him. And David shepherded his people into a golden era of justice and peace.

But most of the kings who came after David saw to their *own* needs rather than the needs of the people. The nation, already small, ended up being divided into two kingdoms. Israel and Judah were invaded and sacked and conquered by one world power after another. And finally, by imperial Rome itself.

Rome occupies their land. And rules it with an iron fist. For more than a few centuries before the time period covered by the gospels, the people have been finding comfort in the words of prophecy. Longing for a king like David. Growing increasingly desperate for a king like David to restore their country to its glory days.

People begin to get their hopes up when, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, Persian astrologers show up in Jerusalem, searching for a child they claim has been born king of the Jews. This child grows into a man. He preaches and he teaches about a kingdom. He tells stories that suggest what that kingdom is like.

More than once during his ministry, the people try to make him king. But he won't let them. He's not having any of it. *What kind of king is that?*

One of his first disciples hails him as the King of Israel. But he isn't what his first disciples expect. He isn't what the people of Galilee and Judea expect, either. He doesn't act like a king. And he certainly doesn't live like one. He doesn't live in a palace. He doesn't even have a place to lay his head. He doesn't wear royal garments. His possessions are few. And he doesn't have servants waiting on him hand and foot. In fact, he tells his small band of followers that he's come not to *be* served, but to *serve*. *What kind of king is that?*

At long last, he enters the capital. And great crowds welcome him. Spread their cloaks before him. Lift their voices, cheering, *Blessed is the king! Blessed is the king!*

But this One they hail as king comes jouncing into the city on the back of a poor man's animal. On the back of a donkey!

He is *so* not the kind of king that the first-century world expects him to be. He doesn't come charging into Jerusalem on a big white stallion with armies and chariots behind him, ready to overthrow the despised forces of empire. *Such a disappointment*, the people mutter. *What kind of king is this?*

That question was asked in the first century. And in the twenty-first century, it's *still* being asked. He's not the kind of king that our contemporary world expects. He's not a commander-in-chief. He's not a military hero. And he's not fabulously rich. The way he lived while he walked this earth just doesn't fit with the lifestyle that this market-driven society would condition us to covet.

But instead of altering the present-day way of life in loving obedience to his teaching, some try to tweak his gospel

to conform to a culture of accumulation. Even some *pastors* preach a distorted gospel of prosperity, declaring that “It is God’s perfect will to overflow you with abundance.”

But the true gospel, the radically countercultural gospel, doesn’t proclaim that the carpenter from Nazareth comes to make us rich. Rather, on this Sunday before Black Friday, we recall that he cautions us against a mindless materialism. He invites us to examine our attitudes toward money. He calls us to consider who we’re serving. Eventually, each one of us has to decide who rules our lives. Is it the consumer-culture with its seductive demands to shop and spend?

Or is it a king who possesses none of the trappings of earthly power? *What kind of king is that?* At his final meal with his disciples, he teaches that among his followers, the greatest must be like the least. The humble. The powerless.

My sisters and brothers, are we okay with being powerless? Don’t we want to be independent and self-sufficient and not to have to rely on anyone else? To be able to manipulate every aspect of our lives? To rule over our own little domains? There’s something in our willful human

condition that causes us to crave a measure of control over our families, our finances, our schedules, our relationships, our entertainment—over everyone and everything around us. Including our future. We have an overarching need to exert control. And we live in a society that offers us a vast quantity of products and choices, giving us the illusion that we *are* in control. We want to be in control. Kind of like a king.

But what kind of king *relinquishes* control? What kind of king allows himself to be denied and betrayed? Arrested and tried? What kind of king, when asked straight out if he *is* in fact a king, never claims to be one at all? What kind of king is rejected so totally that when he's sentenced—when he is condemned to death—the leaders of his own people shout: *We have no king but Caesar!*

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke, the twenty-third chapter, beginning with the thirty-third verse...

On a skull-shaped hill outside the city, the One on the cross relinquishes control. Surrenders himself. Gives himself up. Now, you may have noticed that the details of his suffering

are not provided. Luke doesn't need to go into detail—so common are crucifixions. So practiced and so proficient are Roman execution squads as they go about their grisly task.

They hurl taunts at him. *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!* In their day and time, a king would drink only the very finest wine. But in a sneering parody, soldiers offer soured wine to this One who wears a crown not fashioned of gold, not encrusted with jewels, but woven of long, piercing thorns.

And above that crown, above that head, the inscription reads: “This is the King of the Jews.” Placed there as a warning that a similar fate awaits anyone who dares to challenge the power of Caesar. Clearly, those who put that inscription there have no *clue* as to the truth of its words. No clue.

In the darkness of Jesus' final hours, *no one* seems to understand what kind of king he is. The Jewish leaders don't understand. The Roman soldiers don't understand. The blasphemer crucified beside him doesn't understand. But Luke tells us that one person there *does* understand.

On Jesus' other side, a second offender hangs. And with his last breaths, pleads: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. This condemned criminal is the only one on Skull Hill who knows the nature of that kingdom. The only one who knows that Jesus is—in truth—a king. The only one who knows what kind of king he is.

On this final Sunday of the Christian year—a year during which we have journeyed with Jesus all the way to this place—on this Sunday, we hear *exactly* what kind of king he is.

Jesus is the kind of King who gives a repentant sinner far more than he asks for. Jesus is the kind of King whose promise to a dying man echoes through the centuries. *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise*. The assurance of salvation is not relegated to some far-off, distant future. Salvation is assured *today*!

Today we hear that Jesus is the kind of King who doesn't just tell *us* to pray for those who abuse and persecute us. Jesus is the kind of King who prays for his executioners. Even as they drive the nails. Jesus is the kind of King who prays for those who have mocked him and conspired against him. Who

prays for you and me and every one of us who are complicit in his suffering and in his death. Jesus is the kind of King who prays: *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.* Who prays for every one of us he died to save.

Jesus is the King who lays down his life and takes it up again. Jesus lives! He is the King who rules—as Jeremiah proclaims—with wisdom and righteousness. Jesus is the King who establishes justice.

Jesus is the King who feeds the hungry. Who heals the broken. Who offers hope to the hopeless. And who calls you and me to do the same. Who calls you and me—for the rest of our days—to be about the loving service of his kingdom.

For Jesus Christ is the King who reigns over an eternal kingdom that is becoming a present reality in this world—now, today!—whenever and wherever God's good intention and God's perfect will shape the way people live.

You are among those people whose lives are being shaped. You belong to the King! You are his. You are citizens of his great kingdom. All your allegiance—and all mine—is due him.

Christ the King reigns over your life and mine.

Christ the King reigns over all earthly dominions and rulers and powers.

Christ is King of Kings!

Christ is the King who remembers you always.

Christ is the King who forgives you still.

Christ is the King who loves you forever.

Christ is the King of saving grace.

And Christ is the King who desires that *you* have a place with him in Paradise!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.