
“Christ the King?”

**A SERMON on Luke 23:33-43 for Christ the King: the Last Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 20 November 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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I don’t know if you’ve heard, but apparently things aren’t going so well right now at the Internet service Twitter.

Of course, I’m being a bit facetious:¹ even if you have never used Twitter or don’t understand what Twitter even is, if you’ve had *any* exposure to the news this week—even if only from off-hand comments by the local radio DJs—you’ve undoubtedly heard about the troubles at the social media giant. In the three weeks since business magnate and world’s-richest-man Elon Musk took over the company, we’ve seen headline after headline about terminations and layoffs, ultimatums and resignations, on-again-off-again talk of notable changes to the platform, and more. Of particular note, the combination of layoffs dictated by Musk and resignations arising in reaction to Musk’s actions has decimated the workforce so much that mission-critical departments have been left with only a single person—or, in some cases, no one at all—to manage things. Concerns are mounting about the potential for some technical glitch to simply take down the whole site, so much so that “RIP Twitter” and “Goodbye Twitter” have been trending “hashtags” on Twitter itself over the past couple of days.

As it turns out, the accolades and the accessories of power and achievement that we so often look toward in this world do not always hold sway. The drama these past couple of weeks with Twitter and Elon Musk points, in its own way, to this reality. Simply being rich doesn’t mean you know what you’re doing. Moreover, having the titles of command and authority that our world recognizes—in Mr. Musk’s case, owner and CEO—does not necessarily mean that you actually have control or ultimate power.

In our scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning, we find Jesus captured in the grips of the worldly powers of the day. We’ve stepped ahead a bit further in the storyline that we’ve been following for many, many weeks now—forward to the climax, in fact, to the place where it has all been leading: the cross. Having provoked the ire of the leaders of the empire, Jesus has been condemned to death. He is being executed by The State for sedition and treason. And that death, that execution, was to be by way of crucifixion—hanging on a cross—one of the most gruesome and torturous ways possible. Moreover, crucifixion was meant to be deterrence. “Crosses outside cities and along roadways were a Roman public service announcement: Caesar is Lord. We are your masters. Defy us, and *this* is what will happen to you.”²

Jesus did, of course, defy the powers that be of that era, and so to the cross they led him. And unlike the sorts of battles between powers that we take part in, Jesus doesn’t resist—at least not with force and fury.

But why?

¹ Adjective: “meant to be humorous or funny; not serious”

² Michael Rinehart, “From a Preacher” commentary for 20 November 2022, in *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*, Year C 2022 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2021), 287-288; emphasis added.

The Reverend Shannon Kirshner, senior pastor of the landmark Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, that grand cathedral-like church right in the middle of the so-called “Magnificent Mile,” helps us ponder that:

Have you ever wondered why Jesus did not fight back? [she writes]. Why God chose to save us, to show us God’s love, like that? Why did God choose to be God in such a vulnerable way? Jesus, our King of kings, Lord of lords, the fullest revelation of who God is, the one whose reign we honor this day, to whom we give our life, *that* Jesus just hung there.

He hung there, spoke words of forgiveness and welcome, showed compassion, and died. God’s actions in Jesus, the way God expresses God’s power and dominion, are so dissonant with what we know of power and leadership in our world. Seriously, what are we to make of a God, our Sovereign, our King, who suffers and dies by choice?

It can be hard to know what to make of it. Father Robert Capon tried to give words to the struggle in his book *Hunting the Divine Fox*. In one chapter entitled “Superman,” Father Capon puts it this way:

The human race is, was, and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. *We don’t want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it.* We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he blasphemed: he claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim. It’s not that we weren’t looking for the Messiah; it’s just that he wasn’t what we were looking for. Our kind of Messiah would come down from a cross. ... He wouldn’t do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never dying. (Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, p. 91)

Coming down to fight, refusing to give into death, those are the qualities of power and leadership that we understand, that we see, that we certainly prize. Forgiving, expressing compassion, showing welcome, being vulnerable—all things Jesus did as he hung there, dying, our King—we don’t prize those things the same way, do we?³

Indeed, we don’t prize those things in our world. I mean, perhaps some of us *say* we do—especially those of us who like to think of ourselves as “good Christians” or simply “good people.” But nevertheless, the world around us still looks to accolades and achievements, fortunes and fame, muscle and might as it judges who it deems to be in control.

The good news of the gospel, though, is that in the end, it is in fact God in Jesus Christ that

³ Shannon J. Kirshner, “Power and Strength”, sermon for 20 November 2016 at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/112016.html> .

proves victorious. Sure, in this scene on Calvary Hill that we've been taken to by our scripture reading this morning, it sure looks like the powers have gotten Jesus right where they want him. But we, the church, are here to give witness to the fact that the story didn't end there on that hill. No, you see, there was a third day, and an empty tomb, and a Christ in our midst that could not be crushed even by death itself.

In today's reading, we see that the way of Christ's rule is very different, as a glimpse of his kingdom is revealed in his words of promise and mercy, even to those who hung him there in the first place. And in the whole of the story, we see that such a rule is the one that ultimately has the final say, no matter who the world *thinks* is seated in the CEO's office.

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For churches like ours that follow the patterns of the Christian year in our worship life, today is known as "Christ the King Sunday." It is the last Sunday in the yearly cycle, and as our journey through another year comes to a close, we pause to proclaim and celebrate Christ's ultimate rule in our lives and in our world. On this day, we also acknowledge that the Christian story has an end to it—we *are* driving towards a destination, which is the Kingdom of God. It is a celebration of what is and an anticipation of what is yet to come.

Of course, speaking about Christ as "king" is not without its problems. History is littered with examples of kings (and queens) who were simply bad: abusive, capricious, lacking in wisdom or skill or love. And likewise, history is also littered with examples of kings (and queens) who *abused* the image of Christ as King to claim for themselves a divine mandate for their own royal prerogatives. And yet, even there's a reason that our Christian confession of Christ as King has stuck with us, even with all the imperfections and difficulties of such language. It comes down to a simple, yet profound question: if Jesus is king, then who is *not*? If Jesus is king, then *what* is not?

That's the question that took Jesus to the cross. If he had merely been a nuisance or even a religious radical, he would not have warranted any attention from Pilate, the representative of the emperor. He especially would not have warranted crucifixion, even if found guilty. But the fact, the *historical* fact, that he was killed by crucifixion betrays the reality that he was a political threat to the empire itself.⁴

If Jesus is king, then Caesar is not, you see.

"Jesus' rule and kingdom are profoundly subversive to any worldly authority that demands allegiance over loyalty to God."⁵ That's why, I believe, confession of Christ as King has persisted, and in fact remained powerful, even and especially among people trying to resist the unjust rule of some supposed "authority". Among people who lived under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the confession of Jesus as Lord and Christ as King meant that Caesar did not, ultimately, have the final say. For enslaved Africans labouring to line the pockets of white

⁴ See Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), especially chapter 2.

⁵ Robert A. Bryant, exegetical commentary on John 18:33-37, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year B, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 337.

American society in the South or white British and Spanish society in the Caribbean, the confession of Christ as King meant that the rule of the “master” in the “big house” was only temporary. For Pope Pius the 11th, who first established “Christ the King Sunday” and added it to the Roman Catholic calendar in 1925, the confession that Christ is King stood as a counter-example to the failed reigns of Kaisers and czars, a counter-medicine to the addictive drug of nationalism that had taken all of Europe on a bad trip through the horrors of World War I, and as a counter-testimony to the noise and fury rising in the voices of folks like Mussolini. For some German Protestants gathered in the Barmen section of the city of Wuppertal in 1934, the confession that Christ is King was a rejection “of the false doctrine [that] there [are] areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ” and a defiance of the idea that the church must bow “to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.”⁶

For any of us on this very day, our own confession of Christ as King—really, our own recognition of the reality that Christ *is* King—it stands as a bold testimony, a protest, if you will, against *any* power that would try to keep us captive. In the face of violence, we say “no, the *Prince of Peace* is King, not you.” In the face of illness, we say “no, the *Great Physician* is King, not you.” In the face of politicians who bend or even break the truth to serve their own ends, we say “no, the *One who is Truth itself* is King, not you.”

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If you remember back to the very beginnings of Twitter, some 16 years ago now, perhaps you recall that one of the odd features of the platform was that it only allowed the posting of messages that were 140 characters or less. Back in the day before smartphones, among other things, this meant that you could post a message anywhere you were from simple text-only text messaging on your cell phone. For some, the 140-character limit seemed like shackles; by others, though, it was celebrated as a way to get communications to be raw and right-to-the-point.

Short messages that contained in their stunning brevity all that needed to be said were not a new thing in 2006, however. You could say that we Christians have been “tweeting” truth since the very beginning. “Christ is King”—just 14 characters. “Jesus is Lord”—even shorter, at 13 characters. And yet embedded within these two fundamental confessions is gospel truth that changes the world, despite all appearances to the contrary. And with just another 51 characters, you could join in a simple prayer that could change your life: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.

⁶ *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, 1934. The Barmen Declaration subsequently has been included among the subordinate standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the complete text can therefore be found within the *Book of Confessions* of that denomination as chapter 8 (pages 280 – 284 of the 2016 edition).