

Christ the King C November 24 2019

Luke 23:33-43

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace, peace, and life-giving love to you from the Triune God. *'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.'"*

As a young boy, I grew up on the edge of an expanding city. This meant there were lots of interesting areas to play around. I used to love playing a game called king of the castle. My friends and I would roam the neighbourhood looking for a dirt pile to climb up on. The aim was to race to be the first one to the top of the dirt pile, from which the winner would declare, "I'm the king of the castle." You would then have to defend your title with all your might while the rest of your marauding mates would try to topple you. Some tried pulling the king down. Others tried pushing the king off the hill. For a real wind-up, the king would taunt the rest of us with, "I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascals." We all wanted to take over the kingdom.

Each attack on the king was a deliberate, and yet, unspoken demand for proof. "If you're really the king, prove it. Defend yourself. Show us your power and might. Save yourself and your kingdom. Because if you don't, I'll overthrow you." Each one of us wanted to climb the dirt pile and yell, "I'm the king of the castle."

It was a great game. We had heaps of fun. The problem is though, that we grew up but never stopped playing the game. We became adults and the game became a way of life.

Our dirt piles became success, money, power, control, reputation and popularity. For some, the dirt piles became our families, our children, or the fairy tale of living happily ever after. Others climbed the dirt piles of being right, holy, or patriotic. Often our dirt piles became ways of thinking, political parties, or social groups. Our nation and even our churches at times have wrestled to become “king of the castle.”

There are all sorts of kingdoms. I think it would be quite easy for us all to name the dirt piles of our lives, the dirt piles on which we have played king or queen of the castle. The adult version of king of the castle is about filling our emptiness, fighting our fear, and ultimately establishing some type of order and control for our lives. What began as a child’s game has become the reality of our lives. For many of us life is a constant scrambling to establish and maintain our little kingdoms, to convince ourselves as much as anyone else that we are okay, we are enough, we are the king or queen. That’s a hard way to live.

Today, the Feast of Christ the King, celebrates and reminds us that playing king of the castle doesn’t have to be the end goal of our lives. Life can be different. We don’t have to spend our lives trying to get to the top of a six-foot pile of dirt. We don’t have to spend our lives trying to keep our balance on top of a lifeless mountain. Christ the King invites us to stop playing the game. Life doesn’t have to be, was never intended to be, an ongoing game of king of the castle.



If we choose to stop playing the game it means we must give up our little kingdoms. We can't celebrate Christ the King while continuing to fight our way up the dirt pile. We can have one or the other, but never both. Today we will again pray, "your kingdom come." It rolls off our tongues with ease and familiarity, doesn't it? But do we ever stop and contemplate, I mean seriously question, what we're really asking for and do we really mean it? If we pray, "your kingdom come," then we must fully accept the inherent request, "my kingdom go." "Your kingdom come, my kingdom go."

It's one thing to pray for God's kingdom to come. It's another to let our kingdom go. After all we've been king of our own castles for a long time. Or at least we've convinced ourselves that we have. It's not easy to let go of our kingdoms and more often than not, I think we try to negotiate a deal with God. "Ok God. Prove you are the king and then I'll step down. Show me evidence of your kingdom and then I'll let go of mine."

In today's gospel, the leaders, the soldiers, one of the criminals – all want the same thing. They want to see proof that Christ is the king. They want to see evidence of his kingdom. Aren't we the same? I know I get frustrated at times and want Jesus to make it all easy for me. After all, if Jesus is really the king, the one to rule our lives, and if we are supposed to believe that – then let him prove it. "Save yourself if you are the Messiah of God. Save yourself if you are the King of the Jews. Aren't you the Messiah? Then prove it. Save yourself and me."

On one level, I think we want to see Jesus come down from the cross. We want to see his wounds disappear. We want to see a well-dressed king – one with a golden crown, physical prowess, military might, and political power. We want to see something spectacular, something beyond the realities of our ordinary life.

At a much deeper level, however, these demands are about more than just Jesus saving himself from death, from physical pain, from political defeat. At a deeper level we are crying out: “Save yourself and us from our own unbelief. Save yourself and us from our need to control. Save yourself and us from the fear that this little pile of dirt I call my kingdom is all there is to my life. Show me. Right now. Prove who you are.”

But friends, Jesus won’t do it – at least not in the way we want or understand it. Jesus won’t offer us proof of his kingship. Instead he offers us the kingdom. He invites us to share in his kingship and he does so in the most gracious silence of deep love. The leaders are scoffing at Jesus. He responds with silence. The soldiers are mocking him. He responds with silence. One of the criminals derides him. He responds with silence. All are demanding proof. None are getting what they ask for. Jesus doesn’t take himself or the criminals off the cross. He doesn’t answer the leaders. He refuses to respond to the soldiers. He remains silent.

In that silence the other criminal begins to understand. It’s not about getting proof of Christ’s kingship – it’s about letting go of our own kingship. It’s about coming down from our little piles of dirt and realising that we already are, and always have been, royal members of God’s holy kingdom. This is what lies behind the criminal’s plea, ““Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.””

“Remember me not because of what I have done or left undone. Remember in spite of those things. Remember me not because of who I am but because of who you are.” His cry to be remembered is the cry of one who has emptied himself of everything, has let go of every last kingdom, and whose very life and existence are entrusted to the God who remembers. That is the reign of Christ.

The reign of Christ doesn't mean we now have all the answers, that everything is fixed, that there's no more pain, or that every problem has been eliminated. Jesus won't take us off our crosses. Instead, he gets up there with us. He doesn't fix our lives. Instead, he enters into the reality of our ordinary existence. We are remembered and right there, in the reality of our everyday life, in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our dying, in the midst of our brokenness, in the midst of our guilt and shame, Christ the King comes to us and says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

