

Pastor Gail Duba  
Christ the King Sunday

## Crown Him with many Crowns

November 20, 2022  
Luke 23:33-43

There was a sense of anxiety as the seminary classmates gathered that day. They had been surprised when the professor announced that there would be a final exam. Everyone was asking, "How can you have a final exam in preaching?" How could one prepare? What sort of questions might be asked? Throughout the year there had been lectures on sermon preparation & style, but mostly it had been a course of practice and critique.

Finally, the professor, who was himself an excellent & engaging preacher, came into the room & a quiet fell. The familiar blue books were distributed. "Students," he began, "you may use your Bibles for this exam. You have three hours. There is just one question and it has three parts. Here it is: You have one last sermon to preach in your ministry. It's your last best shot. Choose your text and theme, explain why you have chosen them, and give a full, detailed outline for the development of that sermon." That assignment and that question have left lasting marks upon many a preacher's life and ministry!

**Christ The King.** Today brings us one last shot in this church year. Today the church brings to conclusion all that has been revealed and celebrated in the gospel story of God's work for our salvation since that story began with Advent's hope a year ago. Today it must come together for us into one concluding proclamation about Jesus Christ who is "King of kings and Lord of lords." And today we must address that ultimate question about Christ's lordship in our lives and in our world.

From the beginning of the church's year, we have been hearing about the king who was coming, the anointed one of God who would save his people. Astrologers from the east came inquiring of Herod, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" When called as a disciple, Nathanael answered, almost prophetically, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel." When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, he purposefully fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you, humble and riding upon a donkey," and the people greet him with the shout: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." Kingship is the center around which the charges against Jesus are brought to Pilate. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks. Hours later, Pilate gives his own sarcastic affirmation in the legally required statement of charges placed on the cross: "This is the King of the Jews." The ridicule of the bystanders and the hope of the penitent thief are bound up in this same kingship in today's gospel lesson. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" the soldiers taunted. The crowd loved it! The penitent thief cries out: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power." In the title of "king" there is the occasion of ridicule and the opportunity of hope. It was so then. It seems equally so now.

In the good news of the resurrection, we have celebrated the victory of Christ over death and the powers of evil. Throughout the Pentecost season we have studied the kingdom of God and what it means to live in that kingdom in the light of the resurrection of Christ. Christ is the lord of our lives. Christ is the king.

Suddenly the old professor's question becomes our question. To what lesson do we turn? What theme do we select to pull together into one proclamation and celebration all that we have heard and seen about our Christ? This should be a day of prophetic hope and of a clear Christological statement of the Incarnation, a day of important last words. "If you had one last sermon to preach, what would it be?"

**Christ, The Power And The Wisdom Of God.** With such thoughts in mind, today's gospel lesson was chosen. God's anointed king is dying like a common criminal. To a casual observer on that early Friday afternoon, things were not going all that well for the "king." Though there had been moments of huge crowd support, times when a voice spoke from heaven, and hopes that the kingdom of God was dawning with power at any moment, today's lesson hardly gives that impression. It seems as if some committee chose the lesson because the word "king" is used frequently. How can one look at the cross and call it a throne? How can we see the defeat of death and proclaim it a victory? Surely there must be a better text for our last sermon of the year.

Then again, maybe not! It was Paul who wrote to the Christians at Corinth that he had resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Earlier Paul noted that such preaching was "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called ... [it is] Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." The crucifixion became for the early church the center of its preaching. Luke demonstrates this well in the preaching he records in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts is virtually all we need to know about the grace & the forgiveness of God, just as Paul has suggested.

**Crown Him The Lord Of Love.** Throughout the "Year of Luke" in our lectionary series we have heard Luke's favorite theme. The ready and generous grace of God is shown repeatedly. In recent Sundays we studied the story of the healing of 10 lepers, an act of God's love and grace. We have watched as Jesus, like the promised shepherd of Ezekiel, came searching for the lost and hiding Zacchaeus. We have overheard the prayers of the Pharisee and the Publican as they prayed in Jesus' parable, all the while being reminded of our need to trust God's grace. None of us can forget Jesus' words just before the beginning of today's lesson: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The ever-present grace of God is one of Luke's gospel themes.

From the parables of the waiting father, the "good" Samaritan, & from the story of the penitent thief on the cross, all of these reported only by Luke, we have heard the good news of Jesus Christ. Gentile & Jew, sinner & saint, young & old, it makes no difference. The full blessings of forgiveness are available to all who repent. The love of God reaches out for all, even to those who arranged the crucifixion. "Father, forgive them...."

Nor is there a time too late! From the parable of the laborers in the vineyard to the real-life moment of the thief on the cross, God's grace prevails, even to the last hour, even to the last moment. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The response is swift and direct. "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." In this exchange, Luke reaches the peak of his report of the crucifixion, the manifestation of God's "salvific mercy to one of the least desirable folks of humanity."

Frederick William Faber grasped the moment as he penned the lines of his hymn, "*There is a Wideness in God's Mercy*", that reads, "*There is welcome for the sinner & a promised grace made good; There is mercy with the savior; There is healing in his blood.*"

On that Friday afternoon, it was "last sermon" time. It was the moment of truth for both Jesus & the criminal who repented. Jesus had preached the grace of God creatively and powerfully. The thief, in his repentance, calls upon Jesus to make those promises good. And He does. Clearly, the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind. Paul writes: *In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Romans 8:37-39).* Jesus Christ is our king. Crown him with many crowns! Crown him the Lord of Love!"

**Crown Him The Lord Of Life.** Today's lesson carries us beyond its moment & into a new age of history—an age yet to come. In a single sentence from the crucified Christ, the finite is merged with the infinite, the here is joined to the hereafter, the now is joined to the "not yet." All that has come before is joined to all that is promised to come. He does it with a single phrase, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

Jesus Christ is king in this age and the next, in this world and the next. There seems to be a willingness for many to accept the teachings of Jesus but not the divinity of the Christ. Many cannot accept the eternal dimensions that come most naturally with Christ & his teachings. Today's gospel brings us squarely before Jesus' claim.

The criminal, having admitted his own guilt, acknowledges Jesus' kingly state by his request. He begs to be remembered in whatever future awaits them. By his asking, he is begging a gift only a king over the next life has any authority to give.

From our side of the resurrection, it is easy to miss the fact that only Luke, among all the evangelists, presents the destiny of Christ as a part of the crucifixion narrative. Here Christ will transcend life & the death with which this life ends. This is not to say that paradise is a word of Persian origin that refers to a garden. The late Dr. William Barclay writes that it was a walled garden. When a Persian king wanted to do a favor for a subject, he invited that person to walk with him in the garden. Jesus was promising the penitent thief more than immortality. He promised him the gift of companionship, of walking with him in the courts of heaven. Though Luke is the only one to report for us this moment of repentance and salvation during the hours of the crucifixion, this story is fully consistent with the witness of the other evangelists and the writers of the epistles. In John's gospel the "walled garden" becomes "my Father's house" of "many rooms," to which Jesus is going to prepare a place for us. The important words are these: "Today you will be with me..." Christ is the king who speaks with authority not alone about the grace of God in this life, but about the destiny of this life as well. It is such a substantial part of the good news that Paul has written: "If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19)." *Crown him the Lord of Life, Who triumphed o'er the grave and rose victorious in the strife, for those he came to save.*

**Crown Him The Lord Of Years, The Potentate Of Time.** Jesus Christ is King. He is the Lord of our lives in this world and the next. He is Lord of lords and King of kings. He is the lord of all creation. This cosmic kingship, spanning all time and space, is proclaimed eloquently by the epistle to the Colossians. "He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of Christ (Colossians 1:17, 19-20)." The echoes of this cosmic authority and presence are heard throughout the New Testament. John begins his gospel with the profound words of his prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-3, 14)." Is Christ the Lord of our lives, the Lord of our time, and the Lord of our use of our wealth and our skills? Is He the "King" in whose service we daily rejoice? Are we faithful stewards of the properties of the kingdom to which we have been entrusted? We know He rules the heavens. But does He rule our hearts?

It's the last Sunday of the church year. If there were one last sermon to preach, one last time to tell the story, what would you choose? Or better still, what will the answer be when the story ends? The King waits. "*Crown him with many crowns, The Lamb upon his throne; Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns All music but its own. Awake, my soul, & sing of him who died for thee, and hail him as thy matchless king Through all eternity.*"

