

Jeremiah 23: 1-6
Psalm 46
Colossians 1: 11-20
Luke 23: 33-43

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THAT KIND OF KING

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

There was a wonderful tee shirt I saw once that depicted the traditional manger scene with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus in the creche. And blazing overhead in the night sky it said, "IT'S A GIRL!"

Imagine that! We could be celebrating "Christ the Queen" instead of "Christ the King, a Feast Day falling between the end of Ordinary Time and the start of Advent. It's a new Feast-- created by the Pope XI, in 1925. The Pope felt that in the rising Nazi ideologies in the aftermath of World War I, he should assert that Christ was King and above all czars, monarchs, and emperors. But unlike Advent and Lent, that have been celebrated for well over a millennium, Christ the King feels too new, a Feast Day created to assert political power, more of Christ the CEO Sunday, as someone quipped.

So if the idea of Christ the King makes you uncomfortable, good. There are solid reasons for that. I wish "Christ the King" came with an asterisk that said "*but not that kind of king.*"

Christianity is steeped in paradox. Dying to be saved, for example. Jesus is a threat to the Roman Emperor precisely because he is *not that kind of king*. His path to kingship is through degradation, humiliation, and gruesome torture on the cross.

The line is short line for those willing to be *that kind of king*.

Theologian Debie Thomas explains the challenges this poses to her:

I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love. I see no permission to secure my prosperity at the expense of

another's suffering. I see no tolerance for the belief that holy ends justify debased means. I see no evidence that truth-telling is optional. I see no kingdom which favors the contemptuous over the broken-hearted. And I see no church that thrives when it aligns itself with brute power.¹

She concludes that this leaves us with “a king that makes us very uncomfortable.”

While Christ ultimately ascends to a heavenly throne he took no short cuts in this life to his eternal reign as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” Forever and ever and ever as the chorus sings in the Messiah.

The cross does not seem like anyone’s idea of a booster rocket to paradise.

What’s the point of a king who can’t even save himself as the soldiers and crowd taunt and mock him in his anguish on the cross. “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!” To their eyes he was a mess of a messiah—powerless to fight fire with fire. What good is a king like that? How could he liberate anyone from anything? Certainly not an oppressive Roman ruler like Caesar.

But Jesus never said he was *that kind of king*. Jesus was smart and cagey enough to know he wasn’t going to play into their hands.

There are differences in how the four gospels recount the crucifixion which is striking in that it is such a central event in Jesus’s life.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke report that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. In John, Jesus is crucified between two “others.” In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is taunted for his inability to save himself. But not in John or Luke. What is unique to Luke, and I think, important, is that one thief saw the truth about Jesus when he said, “We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

How did the thief know that Jesus’ crucifixion was a political hit job? Had he been in the crowd and heard Pilate say he’d found no fault in him? Somehow, he had not only recognized Jesus’ innocence, but proclaimed it. He stood up for the truth and not the Big Lie.

And then there’s this about Luke’s account: Despite his agony, Jesus remains in relationship until his last breath. The thief who recognized him asked only that Jesus remember him. “Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.” (Although we know from Acts that Jesus didn’t ascend until heaven until 40 days later, so this is perplexing.)

¹ Thomas, Debi, *Journey with Jesus*, A weekly webzine, November 13, 2016

In Luke, Jesus didn't know the extent of the thief's crime, nor did he ask the thief if he had any remorse. As blood poured out from his body, love flowed from his heart and he gave the gift of forgiveness to the thief who had recognized him.

Jesus was *that kind of king*.

Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber reminds us that:

Jesus did not establish an institution, though institutions could serve his cause. He did not organize a political party, though his teachings have a profound impact on politics. Jesus did not even found a religion. No, Jesus began a movement, fueled by his Spirit, a movement whose purpose was and is to change the face of the earth from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends.²

And that movement needs all of us and it always has. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry reminds us that Jesus was always calling us to act:

That's why his invitations to folk who joined him are filled with so many active verbs. In John (1:39) Jesus calls disciples with the words, "Come and see." In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he asks others to "Follow me." And at the end of the Gospels, he sent his first disciples out with the word, "Go" as in, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15).

Curry notes that how following Jesus can change the world, citing how poverty and hunger were abolished among some of the communities of Jesus' earlier followers.

The Acts of the Apostles calls this abolition of poverty one of the "signs and wonders" which became an invitation to others to follow Jesus too, and change the world. . . . It didn't take a miracle. The Bible says they simply shared everything they had (Acts 4: 32-35). The movement moved then in that particular way.³

²Weber, Nadia Bolz, *Progressive Christian*, December 1, 2015

³Michael B. Curry, *Following the Way of Jesus* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), v, 3–5, 6–7,

As we pause after the election and release the fear and terror many of us felt about our democracy, and as we pause and settle the coming season of Advent, let us challenge ourselves both in our lives and in our beloved St. Peter's community to imagine new ways to realize God's kingdom on this earth.

We don't need to wait for a miracle. We have all we need in the miracle of Jesus Christ. It's pretty simple. All we have to do is share everything we already have: his love, his selflessness, his forgiveness, and his peace.

Jesus didn't want subservience and passivity in his followers because he wasn't *that kind of king*. He wanted action. Today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. But what really matters is what we choose to do, to risk, to sacrifice, and who we choose to serve on all the Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays of our lives. AMEN

