

Scriptures: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

Reign of Christ

Earlier we heard that today is Reign of Christ – or Christ the King – Sunday, whichever way you prefer to say it, and it's the last day of the church calendar year. It's a beautiful day in the life of the Church when we think about and focus on the victory Christ alone gives us. We're able to recognize that despite all the chaos and turmoil in the world and the Church, He's still on the throne – He's still taking good care of us. Most times we think about Jesus suffering on the cross for our sake, which He did, but rarely think about Him as King of kings.

When we think of kings, we automatically tend to look at human standards of leadership. What is a good leader? What makes a good leader? What kind of characteristics do they exhibit? I bet if we asked most people in America, even those who attend church on Sunday mornings, where we should look for leadership today, most would give us a non-religious answer.

They'd tell us to look in the White House, the Statehouse, or wherever their preferred political person lives. When we have good leaders in national and State positions, everyone benefits, but when we have poor or non-existent leadership, everyone suffers. Usually the most vulnerable and powerless suffer the most – but the whole society is negatively impacted. Today, I want us to look in a different direction for leadership, because what we're going to look at can transform not only what happens in the White House or the Statehouse, but also what happens within us, our families, our local church, and the community. Today we'll look for leadership on the cross – and we'll hear the One who speaks there. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 23:33-43. **Read Luke 23:33-43.**

Roman Executions

Here we are on the cusp of Advent, and we've just read Luke's recording of some of the events of Good Friday. He writes, "When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified Him there, along with the criminals – one on His right, the other on His left," (Luke 23:33). Jesus, who never did a wrong thing in His life, was being put to death with two criminals. Depending on what translation you read, the word used for "criminals" can mean "bandits," or even "terrorists."

At Christmastime we often talk about some of the errors we see play out in church Christmas pageants – like the Magi visiting a newborn baby. We don't often talk about some of the errors we see in the retelling of the Good Friday and Resurrection stories, but they surely exist. The guys hanging on the crosses beside Jesus are a case in point. We often talk about them being robbers. They were worse criminals than

robbers – Rome wouldn't have wasted time making a public display of common thieves. Roman "justice" was especially swift. They would have dispatched them with swords or spears, or cut off their hands and left them maimed for what remained of their lives if they were simple robbers. The guys on the crosses beside Jesus were rebels doing everything they could to undermine Roman rule. And Jesus was put up on the central cross between them, because of His claim to Kingship – remember Pilate? He made sure that Jesus' claim to Kingship was on display at the cross on Good Friday.

Luke records Jesus speak three times from the cross in his telling of Good Friday. Today we heard two of the statements Jesus made. "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up His clothes by casting lots," (verse 34). He asks God to forgive those crucifying Him. That's us, friends. He's hanging there, bleeding and dying for our sake, to free us from sin, and make us right with God. And what does He do? He prays for us.

Forgive Them

"Forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." It's pure injustice. He don't deserve to die – we do. Under similar circumstances most people would try to retaliate. Or maybe be paralyzed with pain – completely broken by their torture. Jesus chooses a different path – a royal one – that shows the cross isn't a trap, it's His throne. His greatest work. He asks for forgiveness for us, but also for the people there who were mocking Him, shaming Him, condemning Him.

I've told you before, I'll say it again – this was an utterly humiliating experience for Jesus. We sanitize the Good Friday experience, even in movies, with "R" ratings, like *The Passion of the Christ*, Jesus is wrapped in a loin cloth. I'm convinced that while He was beaten, and then crucified, He was naked, without a stitch of clothing. Those guards wouldn't have bothered gambling over strips of torn up rags. They cast lots for His clothes. They were trying to win His linen garments.

"The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at Him. They said, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is God's Messiah, the Chosen One,'" (verse 35). Even after praying for them, there were scoffers. People who didn't believe. There's people who don't believe yet. Jesus knew this – He knew how they were. He'd been butting heads with these Pharisees and Sadducees for years. Even in their cruelty, He loves them.

Scoffing Soldiers

"The soldiers also came up and mocked Him. They offered Him wine vinegar and said, 'If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself,'" (verses 36-37). These were the same bunch of guys who had just been gambling moments ago for His clothes. They beat Him, nailed Him to the cross, ultimately one of them would pierce His side with a

spear. To add injury to insult, they've even affixed a sign above Jesus' head. "There was written notice above Him, which read: This is the King of the Jews," (verse 38), Luke tells us. Jesus responds by praying for them.

The cross of Christ stood between the crosses of two criminals, thieves, or terrorists. One of them rails against Jesus. "Aren't You the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" (verse 39). The other man rebukes the first. "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong," (verses 40-41). The criminal who speaks up and rebukes the first recognizes that Jesus is innocent. Church tradition names him Dismas, the penitent thief. He even recognizes that Jesus, hanging on the cross is a king. Near to death, he makes a bold request. He says, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom," (verse 42).

Being around Jesus and His humility was rubbing off on Dismas. He just wants remembered. He doesn't want special treatment. He doesn't ask for some special perk. He hasn't asked to be a \$10,000 gold plate contributor at a political luncheon with the opportunity to talk for five minutes with your Presidential candidate of choice. They do that – I don't know if you know that – during Presidential elections the different political parties will host meals in big cities so that wealthy patrons can attend and pay for a plate of food and the chance to meet the would-be President of the United States.

You'll Be With Me

Instead of being just a memory, notice what Jesus tells him. "I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise," (verse 43). Today. It's an immediate thing, because the guy is right there, present with Jesus Christ in that moment. What is paradise, anyway?

Some people would say Heaven. But, our focus or reason for following Jesus should not be for us to get into Heaven. That sounds wild, doesn't it? Let me explain. Heaven isn't the goal. For us as Christians, I hope we would all say, that being face-to-face with Jesus Christ is the goal! Our eternity starts the day we take personal ownership of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Let me say it another way. Our fulfillment throughout eternity will come only through the personal relationship we have and nurture with Jesus Christ today. Eternity is now.

Both criminals had a relationship with Him, but only the one realized his own flawed sinfulness and need of a Savior. Dismas was able to recognize the profound depth of his need, and the opportunity Jesus was giving him to live into it with the time he had left. The other one, who continued to berate and belittle Jesus was as oblivious as we are before we recognize our need of a Savior. I want you to listen to something. Pay close attention to the words of this song. **Play:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeeVfwuzjuU>.

Jesus – the Perfect Leader

What does all this say about leadership? It demonstrates that Jesus is a true leader – the Perfect Leader. He's not a politician or a bureaucrat. He's the "King who stepped down from His throne" to save us. He's the "God who poured out His heart to romance a world that was torn apart" by sin. He doesn't put obstacles in the way of someone who has so little time left. He seizes the opportunity, He takes the risk. Jesus Christ, God-in-the-flesh, risks believing that people are more than their failings. See friends, in today's passage, you and I would fit very well on those crosses along side Jesus. We deserve it. We've rebelled. So which criminal are you most like? The one who belittles and berates until he runs out of air, or Dismas, the one who repents and recognizes that Jesus is so much better than himself, and who just wants remembered?

What love Jesus has for us! Going through abuse as horrific as what the crucifixion was, and then excusing the ignorance, hardness of heart, thirst for blood, and moral blindness which even today would allow some to put to death the Author of Life. We can't fathom the depths of His love for us. Why would Jesus do this? Because He loves us. He sees us – He saw them – as we truly are. We aren't powerful. We're weak, ignorant, blind, and fearful. He knows it. In His crucifixion, He recognizes the misery of human existence, and yet, He says we're worth redeeming. God can forgive. He can open eyes. He can put us on a different path.

While we didn't cover it in our reading this morning, Jesus gets out only one more sentence before His death on the cross. It's another prayer. "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit," (Lk. 23:46). It's Jesus' declaration of faith – a shout of triumph. He's just whipped sin. He's successfully completed what He came to do.

Leading From the Cross

"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." That's leadership seeing through the darkest moment, seeing beyond how things momentarily appear and recognizing how they truly are. "Today you'll be with Me in paradise." That's leadership taking risks, and believing that people are better than their failures. "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit." That's leadership being committed to the One who loves and knows us most intimately. That's holding onto the Center – the Core – of our faith.

Leading from the cross may not make us popular. It may even get us into trouble. Examining Jesus' leadership from the cross, there are a couple things we need to put into practice as a local church, as well as individually as His people. Leading people the way Jesus does won't be toxic. He doesn't turn and hurl insults back at people. He quietly took the insults along with the nails.

Leadership like His won't be ineffective. It won't be a case of just trying to make things a little better, or trying to maintain until the next person comes along after us. It will be risky and bold. It will value people and their relationships with each other and with God above issues. It will be intense, decisive, grace-filled, and immediate.

After Jesus died, what happened to Him? He was buried in the tomb. And after His body laid there dead for three days, you know what happened, Church – He rose again! If we let Him lead us from the cross – it may take a little longer than three days for us. We have a tendency to be as stubborn as mules, but eventually He will produce resurrection, new life, and a new creation, in us! Christ displays His leadership most visibly on the cross, for the whole world to see, if they'll just take the time to look at something so shameful and scandalous. He calls us to faithfully follow His path to restore relationships with others and with God through Him. "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice!" (Psalm 97:1).

Prayer: God of Eternity, we stand with the courage of those who insisted, even in perilous times, that not even the most powerful rulers of this earth hold our eternal destiny in their hands. We are secure in Christ, whose reign is just, whose power is endless, and whose love is unfathomable. God of Eternity, we join the chorus of saints throughout the ages who continue to declare that Christ is our King! Amen.