

Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday

There is a moment near the end of Luke's Gospel that feels almost too fragile to behold, almost too holy to speak aloud. It happens on a hill outside Jerusalem, a place called Golgotha, where Rome crucified its enemies. Three crosses stand in the dust, and on the center cross hangs Jesus of Nazareth – beaten, mocked, stripped of dignity, gasping for breath, and yet still Sovereign. Above His head is a sign Pontius Pilate ordered written in mockery, "This is the King of the Jews," (Luke 23:38).

What an insult, the crowds must have thought. What bitter sarcasm. What a pathetic "king" – crowned with thorns, enthroned on a cross, surrounded not by loyal subjects but by jeering spectators and enemies. But yet on that day, the world saw a King unlike any other – a king whose power wasn't in armies or palaces, but in mercy deeper than the world could understand.

One of the criminals crucified beside Him hurled insults just like the soldiers and religious leaders. But the other criminal – broken, near death, with nothing left to offer – noticed something no one else seemed to see. Maybe it was the way Jesus forgave the ones who hammered the nails, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," (verse 34). Maybe it was the way He suffered without hatred. Or maybe it was the strange, quiet authority that surrounded Him even while His life was slipping away.

Whatever it was the criminal noticed about Jesus, something inside the man broken open. He said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom," (verse 42). It's a simplistic prayer. The criminal doesn't ask to be spared the consequences of his actions. He doesn't ask to be rescued from the cross. He simply asks not to be forgotten by the One who reigns with compassion even while dying.

And Jesus replied – not as a dying man, but as a King – "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise," (verse 43). On this last Sunday of the Christian year, this is the King we proclaim. Not the kind of king the world expects – but the King who rules from a cross, whose power is love, whose victory is forgiveness, and whose throne room is paradise itself. Long before Jesus entered human history, long before the Roman governor mocked the notion of a Jewish king, there was another voice speaking about kingship – a prophet named Jeremiah. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Jeremiah 23:1-6. **Read Jeremiah 23:1-6.**

Woe to the Shepherds – God's Judgment on Failed Leadership

Jeremiah had something to say about leaders – shepherds – who were supposed to care for God's people, but instead scattered them. Our Old Testament lesson this

morning begins with a slam on the leadership of Jeremiah's day. "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the Lord," (Jer. 23:1). He's not mincing words here. It's the language of a God whose heart has been wounded by those entrusted with caring for His people.

Jeremiah prophesied during one of the darkest periods of Judah's history, roughly 627-586 BC. During this time, Judah's throne was occupied by a tragic parade of failed kings. King Josiah ruled from 640-609 BC. He was a good king, faithful to the Lord, and he initiated reform. Jeremiah began his ministry under Josiah, a bright spot before the storm. King Jehoahaz ruled in 609 BC. He was Josiah's son, and ruled for three months before he was overthrown by Egypt.

King Jehoiakim, brother of Jehoahaz, ruled from 609-598 BC. He was one of the most notorious opponents of Jeremiah. He was arrogant, violent, oppressive, and openly hostile to God's word. According to Jeremiah 36, this king once cut up Jeremiah's scroll and burned it. King Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, ruled from 598-597 BC, for a three month time span, before Nebuchadnezzar had him carried into exile in Babylon. King Zedekiah, son of Josiah and uncle of King Jehoiachin, was made king by Nebuchadnezzar, and ruled from 597-586 BC. He was the last king of Judah. He was weak, fearful, and unable to lead. He ignored Jeremiah's warnings. Because he rebelled against Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed.

These kings were supposed to be shepherds – leaders after God's heart. Instead, they exploited God's people, ignored injustice, aligned with idols, persecuted the prophets, and led Judah directly into destruction. So God says, "Woe to the shepherds." It's not a small word, or a mild reprimand. It's a divine indictment. Woe – because they failed to reflect the character of the true Shepherd. Woe – because they allowed fear, corruption, and injustice to reign. Woe – because the vulnerable suffered under their watch.

Jeremiah spoke to ancient kings, but his words echo across time. Every generation knows something about failed shepherds – leaders who abandon their responsibilities, misuse their authority, or forget compassion in their pursuit of control. We know broken systems, misplaced trust, and the ache of longing for someone who will lead with righteousness instead of selfishness. God doesn't stop with judgment. He doesn't name the failure and leave it sit – He promises a solution.

The Promise of a Righteous King

Listen to the heart of God in Jeremiah: "I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the Lord," (verses 3-4). Do you hear it? God refuses to abandon the

flock. Even when human leaders fail – even when the shepherds scatter the sheep – God steps in personally. “I Myself will gather them,” “I will bring them home,” “I will restore them.”

And then comes one of the most powerful promises in the Old Testament. “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land,’” (verse 5). This is the promise of a new King. A restored King. A better King. A Shepherd who will not scatter, abandon, or exploit, but who will rule with wisdom, justice, and righteousness. We see in verse 5 a couple capitalized words that are important, “Branch,” and “King.” It’s written this way in several Bible translations, including the KJV, NKJV, NIV, and NRSV. When we see words like this capitalized, it’s always a reference to God.

Jeremiah tells us the name of this righteous Branch, this future King. He says, “In His days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteous Savior,” (verse 6). Who is this King? Church, we know His name! Jesus Christ – the Son of David. Born in a stable, crucified on a Roman cross, raised from the dead, and reigning forever. He is the answer to Jeremiah’s longing. He is the King we celebrate on this last Sunday of the Church year.

The King who Gathers, Heals, and Leads

Jeremiah’s prophecy says the righteous King will “do what is just and right.” What does it look like for Christ to be our King? Christ gathers the scattered. Our world is scattered by fear, division, sin, and wounds. But Jesus gathers. He gathers the lost, the forgotten. He gathers people from every tribe, nation, language, and background. He gathered a criminal on the cross with a single sentence, “Today you will be with Me in paradise,” (Lk. 23:43).

Many people today carry wounds caused by failed shepherds – parents, spouses, pastors, leaders, systems. But Jesus Christ is the King who binds the brokenhearted. The reign of Christ is not a tyranny – not a benevolent dictatorship, if there ever could be such a thing – it’s a refuge. Christ heals the wounded. Christ our King also leads with wisdom instead of force. Worldly kings lead by dominance. We see Jesus in the Scriptures, always leading by example. Worldly kings demand allegiance. Christ the King invites it. Worldly kings use fear to control people. Jesus casts out fear. His commands are not burdens, but blessings – not chains made to enslave us, but freedom to really live!

Jeremiah 23 calls out anyone who leads – parents, pastors, teachers, mentors, public servants, and all believers. Christ the King Sunday gives us hard questions with which to wrestle. Are we shepherds who gather or scatter? Do we lead with mercy or with pride? Do we draw people closer to Christ, or do we push them away? Do we reflect the justice, humility, and righteousness of our King? Leadership without

compassion isn't leadership. Shepherding without love isn't shepherding. And all authority – every last bit of it – is a sacred trust.

The King on the Cross is the King who Reigns Forever

It may seem strange that on Reign of Christ Sunday we turn our gaze back to the crucifixion. The world tells us that kings have crowns of gold. But Jesus wore thorns. The world tells us that kings sit on thrones. But Jesus hung on a cross. The world says kings are protected by armies. But Jesus was abandoned even by His closest friends. And yet, He IS King! Not despite the cross, but rather through it.

His crown is love. His throne is humility. His victory is forgiveness. This is why the criminal beside Him that day could pray, "Remember me." The criminal recognized what the others could not – that Christ's kingdom is not of this world, but breaks into the world and disrupts the ways of this world through every act of mercy. Jeremiah promised a Shepherd who would gather. Jesus gathered a thief. Jeremiah promised safety. Jesus brought the thief into paradise. Jeremiah promised righteousness. And Jesus gave His righteousness to a dying criminal. This is the King we worship today.

As we end the Church year, Christ's kingship means a couple things for us, since we know and love Him. Christ is King over our fears. He's still on the throne through unwanted diagnoses, through trials, and through sorrows. The forces that scatter us do not rule us. Christ is King over our decisions. We follow His voice – not the loudest voice in the world. He's King over our relationships. We forgive, love, and serve, just as He does. I know that's sometimes really hard to do – especially when the people we're called to forgive, love, and serve cause us pain, give us grief, maybe even do things to intentionally hurt us. Christ is still on the throne through all that – He knows how much that hurts – He experienced it on the cross. And what did He say? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," (Lk. 23:34).

Christ is King over our future. No matter what leaders fail – whether that's men as heads of their families, pastors, teachers, or even presidents – Christ the King always remains faithful. Jesus Christ never fails! His promise to the criminal on the cross, "Today you will be with Me in paradise," is a promise for us, too. Because even over death, Christ is the King. He IS King of the entire creation – and death is a created thing.

The King who Remembers

Think back for a moment to our Gospel lesson this morning, and really picture it in your mind's eye. On that hill outside Jerusalem, a dying man made the most important request of his life. "Jesus, remember me." And our Righteous King remembered him.

The Shepherd of Jeremiah 23 has come! He reigns right now! And one day He will return physically here, with all His saints – we named some of them just a few

weeks ago – He’s coming back to shepherd His people forever. As the song says, “For God so loved the world, He gave His only Son; To die on Calvary’s tree, From sin to set me free, Someday He’s coming back. What glory that will be! Wonderful His love to me.”¹ That’s going to be the most amazing, wonderful day! I hope you know how much He loves you on this last Sunday of the Church year, and how He constantly tries to call you into an ever deeper relationship with Himself.

Next Sunday is the first week of Advent – the first week of the new year in the Church calendar. New Hope, we need volunteers who are willing to light the Advent candles each week. No one’s stepping up, saying they’re willing to do it. In the new Church year, I hope we really, truly live into being citizens of Christ’s kingdom. That we will shepherd others and each other the way He shepherds, love people as He loves them and us, and trust that the King who remembered a thief on a cross remembers us, too.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, our Shepherd and King, gather us when we are scattered, heal us when we are wounded, and lead us in paths of righteousness for Your name’s sake. Make us faithful shepherds in all the places You call us to serve. Reign in us today and always. Amen.

¹

“For God So Loved the World,” song by Alfred Smith, words by Frances Townsend, located at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G11uoaLVwkM>