



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Christ the King (C)**

#### **King of the Universe**

**[RCL] Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43**

It may strike us as odd that, as we celebrate Christ the King, we focus on Christ on the cross. To add to the oddness of this feast of our Lord is our second reading from Luke 1:68-79, the Song of Zechariah, the old priest in the Temple explaining to his wife and others why he will name his and Elizabeth's child John. These two passages from Luke's Gospel may strike one, at first glance, not the most obvious way to celebrate what Pope Paul VI in 1969 named this day, the Last Sunday before Advent, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe; often shortened to Christ the King Sunday, or The Reign of Christ.

Christ the King Sunday was the creation of an earlier pope, Pope Pius XI, during a time of gathering darkness throughout Europe, not dissimilar to what Zechariah and his people experienced under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Thus, the old priest sings, "[The Lord] has raised up for us a mighty savior, born of the house of his servant David. Through his holy prophets he promised of old, that he would save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us" (Luke 1:68-79). This mighty savior, of course, is Jesus, of whom many had hoped would rescue the Israelites from the severe darkness of Roman rule. And this entire song, ostensibly to be about John, defines John's role in just a few words as the one who is to announce the coming reign of Christ and what he often calls the kingdom of God as an alternative to life in the empire.

In 1925, as the world was being gripped by nationalist, secularist, anti-Semitic, and authoritarian-fascist dictators like in the old Roman Empire, Pope Pius XI instituted Christ the King Sunday to refocus the Church, the Body of Christ on Earth, on why we are here at all – to be icons of God's love in this world. As Christ's disciples, we are to serve the world as Christ did: loving God his Father, and loving all people as neighbors – even to the extent of admonishing us to pray for and love our enemies. This would be a hallmark of a Christlike life: to love others as Christ loved all others, and as our Risen Lord and King loves us today. No doubt, Pius XI would recognize the signs of a similar gathering darkness once again, throughout the world today: so-called "strong men," dictators, and fascist governments are once again promising peace and prosperity, but delivering nothing close to the promise Zechariah sings of: "In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

It is our God's tender compassion, which one sees at work even as Jesus is already nailed to a Roman cross. The scene, as Luke describes it, is dark. They are at the Place of the Skull, a hillside outside the city gates of Jerusalem, where the Romans have crucified countless others considered, like Jesus, a threat to the empire (Luke 23:33-43). As Jesus is crucified alongside two other criminals, he forgives the soldiers doing the empire's dirty work, "for they do not know what they are doing." People in the crowd and leaders of the community are mocking Jesus. If indeed he is the Christ, the Savior of God's people, why does he not save himself? Why doesn't he order his followers, who are many, to revolt? The disciples and the reader all know, however, that is not the way of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness.

Then, one of the criminals also crucified joins in the jeering: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other says, "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." He continued, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." We hear Luke's Passion every three years on Palm Sunday. Perhaps, however, we miss the greater meaning. Jesus does not say, "Someday in the distant future you will be with me in paradise – in my Father's kingdom, living with me under the reign of Christ." That is, we can all be with Christ, whom Pope Paul VI calls "the King of the Universe."

As the author of Colossians reminds us, in agreement with the opening words of John's Gospel, this Jesus, the Christ, the Word, was with God before Creation itself, and is "the very image of God, the first born of all creation" (Colossians 1:11-20). This is the Universal Christ and King of the Universe itself, which we know to have been set in motion nearly 14 billion years ago and is still expanding, still growing, still evolving! The Good News for all humankind is that the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption and forgiveness, is open to all today, here and now. For the cross was not the end of the story. It was just the beginning of the reign of the resurrected Christ, whose Spirit is with us and in us at all times. For those of us who know the rest of the story, the prophecy of the old priest Zechariah is true: "In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:68-79).

The Franciscan Sister Ilia Delio, in her book *The Primacy of Love*, reminds us of the power of this moment with Christ on the cross. The reign of Christ, this Paradise he promises us here today, means that "each person is a divine creative work of love." We are all created in the image of God and represent God's special and distinct love for each person. She goes on to speak of that powerful and early follower of St. Francis, Clare of Assisi. Clare, in correspondence with Agnes of Prague (the sister of King Wenceslas!), urges us to meditate on the image, the icon, of Christ on the cross every day, for it is a mirror of our hearts: "Study your face within it, so that you may be adorned with virtues within and without." Delio then asks the reader, "Does your face reflect what is in your heart? When the image of who we are reflects what we are; when our face reflects what fills the heart, then we image Christ, the image of love incarnate, God's agape."

The prophet Jeremiah, the old Priest Zechariah, and Jesus were all familiar with a world of “bad shepherds” dividing, misleading, scattering God’s people, God’s flock, in darkness and fear. Such bad shepherds are at work throughout the world today. It is on the cross that Jesus promises to gather a remnant of those of us who look upon the crucified Christ and see just who we are and whose we are. Christ the King Sunday is meant to be a day, a moment in time for us to be freed from all darkness, freed from the clutches of bad shepherds everywhere. In Christ, through Christ, and with Christ, we can learn to let go of any and all attachments to empire, and let all fears, worries, and obsessions fade into the background. As Albert Nolan, a Dominican priest from South Africa, writes in his book, *Jesus Today*, “For some, the greatest relief of all is the experience of freedom from guilt. Our wrongdoing will never be held against us. We are forgiven. We are free.” We are freed to be with Jesus in paradise today. This is Jesus’ final declaration from the cross. This is what the “mirror saint” Clare wants all of us to see as we gaze at Christ on the cross. May God forgive us, may Christ renew us, and may the Spirit enable us to grow in Christ’s love, mercy, and compassion for all persons, and all creation itself. Amen.

***The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek*** has had the privilege of writing for *Sermons That Work* almost from its inception. He is currently priest-in-charge of a Small But Mighty congregation in the Diocese of Maryland: Christ Church Forest Hill, Rock Spring Parish. Kubicek just celebrated the 40th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, and is still running or walking with weights every morning, writing poetry, and playing music. He is in his eleventh year playing drums and harmonica for On The Bus, a Grateful Dead tribute band in the DC/ Baltimore Metro region. He just welcomed his third grandchild into the world and loves every minute of being Papi K. Life is good in Christ’s Beloved Community! All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.