

Feast of Christ the King
Saint Dunstons Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
23 November 2025

Luke 23:33-43

It feels very strange that we should be talking about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth just a week away from the First Week of Advent, when we celebrate the events that led to his birth. Let me explain why this is the case. The liturgical year for the Church starts with the season of Advent, which usually begins on the last Sunday of November or first Sunday of December. It always ends with the feast of Christ the King, which we usually celebrate the Sunday before Advent. The lectionary gives us a gospel reading that highlights Christ's kingship for each year of the three-year cycle.

On year A, we have Matthew 25:31-46, which talks about the Son of Man's return to judge the earth from his throne of Glory. He will say to those who will be saved, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Although we read primarily from the Gospel of Mark on year B, the text for this Sunday comes from John 18:33-37, in which Jesus affirms that he is King. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews? Jesus answered, 'Yes, it is as you say.' He adds, 'My kingdom does not belong to this world... For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'"

Lastly, on Year C, in which we read primarily from the Gospel of Luke, we read the passage we have for today. At the mount of crucifixion Jesus reveals to the world the type of king he is. He is not like earthly kings, which flaunt their power and wealth and rule through intimidation and violence. Rather, he is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah who dies a violent death for the salvation of the nation. He is the one who "was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account." He is the king who steps into the place of judgement as the true Israel and takes the guilt of

humanity on his shoulders. “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” The sacrifice of our king was necessary because “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53).

We are familiar with the story which we preach every Holy Week, especially on Good Friday. But I want to focus on the interaction between Jesus and the thief who repented. Specifically, I want to focus on the word “Today” in the Gospel of Luke. This word provides us a rich lesson for us in the twenty-first century. Now, let me give you some context.

Jesus is crucified with two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. People stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; the leaders scoffed at him; the soldiers mocked him; an inscription poked fun at him (calling him, “The King of the Jews;”) and one of the criminals derided him.” It is at this point that the other thief says, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ... this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“Perhaps the greatest act of faith in all of scriptures is his request... Jesus is dying on the cross... That was the purpose of the execution... (it is remarkable) that this criminal has the faith to see and believe that Jesus can remember him. He has the faith to see and believe that Jesus is the one who will rule as king... God's power to rule the universe is seen as Jesus is dying on a cross... Yet he sees something more than the obvious: this dying Jesus will rule as king! This dying king can remember him.” (Stoffregen, <https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke23x33.htm>)

To this incredible request, Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The word TODAY is a frequent word for Luke. We see this word at the announcement to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born” (Lk 2:11). We see it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Capernaum, “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk 4:21). We see it in the prototypical story of Jesus seeking after the lost, when he tells Zaccheus, “Today I must stay at your house” (Lk 19:9). We see it at Zaccheus’ conversion, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Lk 19:9). And we see it today, “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).

For Luke, the Kingdom of God, is primarily a relationship with God in the Messiah. The kingdom is the time and place where God's rule is a reality and where all things come under God's loving control. We have been educated to believe the Kingdom of God is a place to which we go when we die. We call it Heaven or the Ever After. But Luke makes it clear that although the entire creation will one day be recreated under the dominion of the returned King, Jesus, we must not wait until death to enjoy a loving relationship with God in the Messiah. Today is the moment of salvation. Today is the time for a relationship with God. Today is the day when we build God's kingdom among us. We cannot wait until a future time to begin a relationship with Christ.

Since today is the day of salvation, we are in the Kingdom of God when we accept God's will for our life as supreme and God's authority over our world as non-negotiable. We are in the Kingdom when we acknowledge our dependance on God with humility and contrition. We are in the Kingdom of God when we do what this thief did: He accepted Jesus as someone who came from God, ("Do you not fear God?) He accepted responsibility for his sin and accepted his sentence as just. He believed that Jesus could remember him even after death, which is remarkable because many people in his day did not believe in the resurrection. He believed this dying man is a king who has a kingdom, and that there was a place for him in that kingdom. In today's Protestant language would say he believed that salvation was not up to him, but up to God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. That salvation is a relationship with this dying man!

Lastly, we are in the kingdom when we live in accordance with the rule of Love (Love one another as I have loved you) and when we do the things that this rule requires. The Christ the King Gospel reading for Year A, tells us what these behaviors are, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Complete text at Matthew 25: 31-46).

When we take care of the least and the lost we take care of Christ himself and we affirm our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. To be in the presence of Christ is to be in the kingdom. This is Luke's message today.

May our Lord continue to bless you, Amen!