

Reign of Christ (Year C)

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*Matthew 14:22-33*

*When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, '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.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'*

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Today is Reign of Christ Sunday or, as it is sometimes referred to as, Christ the King Sunday. Each year it falls on the Sunday immediately prior to the beginning of Advent and, as such, is the last Sunday in "Year C" of the lectionary. Next week, we will begin another season of Advent and, with it, "Year A" of the lectionary which focuses primarily on the Gospel of Matthew.

Therefore, this Sunday is the "hinge" upon which we pivot as a worshipping community towards prayerfully preparing for the coming of Emmanuel, God-with-us. I like to see Reign of Christ Sunday as reminding us who it is that we are so soon to be welcoming among us as a tiny little baby, swaddled in cloth in Mary's lap. Today we are reminded that there is only *one* King, only *one* Savior, only *one* person who can truly save us.

We have all heard the story before. The story of Jesus being placed on trial and sentenced to a criminal's death by crucifixion. The long and arduous walk carrying the cross to Golgotha, the place of the Skull. The nailing of his arms and legs to a cross where he would hang, in agony, between two criminals who deserved their punishment.

He hung there, mocked by the people who had raised him up on that tortuous mechanism. In their mind, they thought him to be a fraud, for surely if he could save others as the stories had told he would be fully capable of saving himself from this horrible fate. But he didn't. He just hung there and prayed for God to forgive them, because they didn't know what they were doing.

In an irony that wasn't appreciated in the moment, above his head hung a sign that said "this is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals, enduring the same painful death as Jesus, called out to him and mocked him. The *other* criminal knew better. *He* knew that he deserved this fate. *He* knew that the man between them did not. He begged for mercy and he received it. That day, after his final breath, he slept in paradise.

After many hours of agonizing pain, Jesus, too, breathed his last. But instead of going to paradise right away, he had a job to do. He had to go elsewhere, to a much more sinister place. Three days later, the story changed and the king who had hung on a cross would now reign in glory at the right hand of the Father.

This is our King. This Jesus fellow. This is a king that did not come to us as a powerful, militaristic warrior. Instead, he made his debut being born to a couple of travelers seeking shelter. On his first evening on this earth, he did not sleep in a comfy bed adorned with beautiful sheets and pillows. Instead, he was laid in a manger, sharing his room with some animals, and two very exhausted new parents.

As he grew up and called disciples to follow him, he did not parade himself around with an army in tow. Instead, he surrounded himself with people that society tended to push to the side. He walked to and fro from village to village, preaching peace, love, inclusivity, and radical hospitality. He said things that threatened people in power.

This is our King. This is who we follow. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church.

On this Sunday before the Season of Advent, you and I are reminded of who it is that we are called to live like. You and I are reminded of who it is that we work for. You and I are reminded of the work that we are called to do.

If you want to know what the work of the church should be, look to our King.

Believe it or not, a lot of people are looking to the church right now. In the wake of a divisive presidential campaign and a nation-wide sense of restlessness and anxiety, people are looking to the church to see what our response will be. People are looking to those of us in the pews to see how we will conduct ourselves. Will the church take up its rightful place as a beacon of hope, peace, and love for all peoples or will the church simply default to the childish, petty, ignorant, and hurtful actions that we see all too often on the news, on our facebook feeds, or in our very communities? People are looking to us and waiting to see what they will find. As people are looking to us, I believe the real question to be “who are we looking at?”

We, my friends, should be looking at a King who put all others before himself, who humbled himself to the point of the cross in order to save humanity, from the greatest of these to the least of these.

We, my friends, should be looking at a King who welcomed the stranger, fed the hungry, defended the oppressed, and shared love to every corner he visited.

We, my friends, should be looking at a King who did not come as one to have power to lord it over people, but arrived as a helpless baby to show a *different* kind of power, a kind of power that subverts all other forms of power.

We, my friends, should be looking at a King who is stronger than the hurtful political rhetoric that we've been overwhelmed with the past several months.

You see, on this Christ the King Sunday, we are to be reminded that Jesus Christ, our King, is the single strongest force in the universe.

Christ the King is stronger than racism.

Christ the King is stronger than the KKK flyers found on the windshields of cars in Patchogue Thursday morning.

Christ the King is stronger than the bullets that fly through the air to innocent victims.

Christ the King is stronger than the drugs and alcohol that threaten the wellbeing of so many people here on this island.

Christ the King is stronger than the husband who abuses his spouse.

Christ the King is stronger than any evil we can imagine.

Christ the King *is* King. He *has been* King and he *will be* King. There's nothing you and I can do to stop it. But why would we? We have been given the beautiful gift of a savior who lives and dies for us! A King who seeks not to profit from our sorrows but to thrive with us in our joys! We have a beautiful King who has a sneaky way of breaking into our hearts and showing us that love does indeed trump hate.

We are heading into one of the busiest times of the year. Sports events, family meals, traveling, parties, gift buying and wrapping, and, on top of all that, the ever-growing pile of ordinary tasks that have to be done to keep everything from spiraling out of control.

As we approach the season of Advent, we are called to let our guard down a little and let the King of Kings creep into our hearts. That isn't always an easy thing to do with so much going on. But we are called to strip off our armor bit by bit by bit. You know the armor I'm talking about. The little pieces of armor that get piled on due to the stress, and the news, and the politics, and the drama, and the business. Little pieces of armor that seek to isolate us from each other and our Savior. On this Christ the King Sunday, I hope you'll join me in taking off a little armor to make room for our King to come inside and do some much-needed work on our souls.

So, together, let us look at Christ the King. Let us allow our lives to be molded into his likeness. Let us hold one another accountable for acting in a way that he taught us. Let us trust that Jesus Christ's reign is supreme and is in no way threatened by anything else, not even death itself. Let us be reminded that, as the Second Helvetic Confession says, "the Church cannot have any other head besides Christ."

Friends, all praise and glory to our King, our Savior, Jesus Christ, who reigns supreme.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.