Sermon 11.23.25
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20

'Jesus Remember Me when you come into my Kingdom'

Christ the King Sunday

Christ the King Sunday is a feast celebrated on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. It celebrates Christ's messianic kingship and sovereign rule over all creation. It has been observed on the last Sunday before Advent since 1970.

As you know this is also a big day in our church year; it is the last Sunday of Pentecost. Next Sunday begins the new church year, and the Advent Season.

So why do we speak of Christ the King?

Paul refers to something important in our reading from Colossians, in agreement with the opening scripture of John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) This Jesus, 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 King of the Universe itself, the divine spark of the big bang theory scientists suggest was set in motion 3.8 billion years ago. And it 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 always with us and in us.

A central idea in Luke, echoed in this week's gospel, is that Jesus' mission is to declare the dawn of a new era, rooted in ancient Israelite history, of release to the captives and liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. **1**

In addition, for Luke, the heart of Jesus' ministry is mercy — and while Jesus does come to declare the nearness of God's kingdom and the inauguration of God's reign, the *kingdom* he has in mind is one of servanthood. When he says, 'But I am among you as one who serves', the *reign* he speaks of is one of mercy. And we are to model that mercy, to be merciful, just as God is merciful; and the key action he has in mind, the essence of loving our neighbor, is to show mercy in measurable ways that have impact. **2**

So we must never confuse the kingship of our Savior, and the kingship of the ancient and modern Caesars. Christ's kingship is a reversal of the worldly kingdoms: instead of domination, servanthood; instead of mockery, kindness; instead of cruelty, mercy; instead of instilling fear, harkening the call to courage.

Powerful message regarding the presence of the two criminals

The Lucan theme that Christ the King came in the spirit of forgiveness of repentant sinners, is revealed in the criminal who has deep faith that the dying Jesus is truly a king and can offer pardon and mercy in which only a king can. Jesus, who will experience God's victory over death declares the repentant

criminal free from sin after he says, ‘Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” It is an acquittal uttered by Him who is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. This aspect of salvation is also present in Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners and his restoration of repentant folk to be with their fellow human beings. **3**

Jesus’ wide mercy

Matthew Myer Boulten of Harvard Divinity School has us look again at whether Jesus only invites the “good thief” to be with him in paradise. **4** Immediately after the two thieves are introduced in the story, Jesus asks God to “forgive *them*” — meaning all of his opponents, of course, but certainly not excluding the one who is the so-called “bad” thief understood from Jesus’ remark to the second thief - “Today you will be with me in Paradise”. This a consoling response to his direct request, but it applies no less to the first thief, who has also been forgiven. Boulton states that the story’s point is clear: when it comes to salvation, God’s mercy falls on the just and unjust alike, and so the very act of drawing a line between “good” and “bad” has no place in Christ’s reign of love. The Great Jubilee means declaring “liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants,” not to mention “release to the captives”.**5**

I realize this point of both criminals being invited to Paradise is very controversial. I have a friend whose husband, who is a very accomplished person, said, “Well if everyone is forgiven, why bother trying to be good!” The reason that this logic does not work, is as follows.

First, let's start with the idea that God is Love. That is what all the Christian mystics say. There is simply no mention of wrath. The God who we see in Jesus is not a wrathful God. God gave us the commandments through Moses, and Jesus said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments".

And Jesus emphasizes following them out of Love; not to impose on our precious sense of freedom, but to help us to *be free* from the consequences of sin. In fact to allow us the greatest likelihood of a path to a life of dignity and self-respect. Paul said the consequences of sin are death. This powerful statement suggests that if we go against the 'best ten ways to live', as the Sunday school curriculum author Jerome Berryman calls the 10 commandments, we are punishing ourselves. We are the wrathful ones.

Theologian Walter Bruegemann said that blaming God's wrath for the negative consequences of our own sinful actions reveals an immature spirituality. He said we punish ourselves rather than allow God to love us into wholeness. God created a world where every action has a reaction. It is a natural law of the universe. So when we finally recognize that *we* cause our own negative consequences, then we are able to transform our lives. Then we are able to repent, to humbly express our sincere regret for our actions that do not build us up, but hurt ourselves and perhap others, and to be open to a fresh start.

Once we are forgiven it is a clean slate. That is why in the Lord's Prayer, we say, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Do we really forgive as God forgives? Or do we

keep reminding those who have sinned grievously and yet transformed their lives that they are not worthy of a fruitful life going forward.

As stated earlier, repentance, forgiveness and salvation is also present in Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, and his restoration of sinners *to be with their fellow human beings.* It's about building beloved community. None of us is perfect, but we are being perfected, because of God's unconditional and abundant love for his creatures.

So no one is getting away with anything. Jesus's forgiveness of the criminals at Calvary is of two men who have already suffered the negative consequences of their behavior. Yet, Jesus invites them to be with him for eternity.

Is it all a matter of semantics? I think not. Nothing changes except that we practice more abundant mercy.

Let us therefore all live into the New Covenant – '*Love others as I have loved you',* a call to love ourselves and others into wholeness, for the sake of beloved community. **6**

Conclusion

So on the Sunday before Advent begins, when we start to make room in our hearts for the Christ child, we also consider the crucifixion, death and resurrection of our Lord for our sake. It is an awesome God who sent his Son so that we might build the beloved community on earth modeled by the life of Christ, and also look forward to eternal life with him. God created us. God knows our limitations, and has compassion for us all. So it is out of gratitude that we should strive to be the fullest expression of a

human being fully alive, for the glory of God and Christ the King .
Amen.

Footnotes

1. Luke 4:18-19; Isa 61:1-4; Leviticus 25:8-12
2. Luke 22:26-27; Luke 6:36; Luke 10:36-37
3. Jerome Commentary, p. 719
4. Saltproject.org for 11.23.25
5. Luke 23:33-34; Leviticus 25:10; Luke 4:18-19
6. John13:34