

Sermon, Proper 29, Last Sunday after Pentecost, Reign of  
Christ

St. Joseph's, Buena Park; St. Stephen's, Whittier

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Luke 23:33–43

November 24, 2013

Blessed be the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Kings and Queens.

Princes and Princesses.

Royalty.

When we U.S. Americans—at least those of us born on this soil—when we think of kings and queens I suspect we have a range of responses, anything from adoration and admiration to fear and suspicion of so much power invested in one person, in one family.

Or maybe any one of us might respond in both of those ways—and everything in between—depending on circumstance.

Those of you who may have started life elsewhere probably bring your own experience or assumptions to the notion of kings and queens.

For all of us, our impression of royalty is highly colored by particular experience or particular propaganda. So whether our views are negative or positive, they likely are skewed. Getting to the complete truth about kings and queens is a challenge.

However, regardless of how you may feel about such leaders right at this moment, I want to throw one more story into the mix, a story that may change your perspective.

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It's a story from World War II England. In an earlier sermon I shared an account of how King George VI walked through bombed-out neighborhoods of London to see firsthand the extent of damage and suffering.

As he walked about, he would stop and visit with men and women whose homes or businesses were destroyed. This humanized the king in the eyes of his people. It's an account of a king with a heart.

But it is not the story I am sharing today.

Instead, I want to offer a related story about his wife, whom we may know best as the Queen Mother, or Queen Mum.

She maintained a quiet profile for most of her life. However, a book about her published in 2009 let us in on a bit more about her colorful character.

She and King George were in Buckingham Palace on September 13, 1940, when it was struck by German bombs.

It was after their own near-death experience that they decided to see how the rest of London fared.

For you see, it wasn't only the king that went out and about. It was his wife, as well. In particular, they visited London's extremely impoverished East End. You know, that side of town that most of us work really hard not even to drive through much less live in. It's also the side of town where structures usually are more vulnerable, less well constructed.

Mere hours after German bombs struck Buckingham Palace, and after lunching in their air-raid shelter, she and the King were visiting London's East End.

She later wrote in a letter: "I felt as if I was walking in a dead city... all the houses evacuated, and yet through the broken windows one saw all the poor little possessions, photographs, beds, just as they were left."

So that is where the king's wife went. The poor side of town where there was widespread devastation. This is what she had to say about it later: "I am glad we [meaning the Royal Family's house] have been bombed. Now we can look the East End in the eye."

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This is Christ the King Sunday. Some say it is about the Reign of Christ.

Either way you look at it, we undoubtedly bring our ideas about earthly royalty to the notion of a Heavenly King reigning over creation.

Since all earthly kings and queens are not as magnanimous as King George VI and the Queen Mother, our expectations of *Christ as King* might be slanted negatively.

So let's take a look at just what kind of King the Son of God would make.

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Our Gospel passage from Luke shares some of Jesus' words from the cross:

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." These words are offered on behalf of those who are carrying out the execution.

And...

“Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”  
These words are offered in response to another man being crucified, a criminal, who had asked Jesus to “remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

*Forgive those who kill me, Father.*

*Be with me in Paradise, Brother.*

*Forgive. Be with me.*

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The Gospel selected for today is usually encountered on Palm Sunday.

You likely recognize it as part of the Passion narrative in the Gospel of Luke--the part that deals with Jesus and the two criminals who were crucified alongside him.

The Passion narrative began in a chapter earlier (chapter 22) with the plot to kill Jesus and the account of the first Lord's Supper (22:14-23). It includes:

--The prediction that Peter would betray Jesus (22:31-34).

--Jesus' warning to disciples of difficult times ahead (22:35-38).

--His prayer on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46).

--The betrayal and arrest (22:47-53).

--Peter's denial (22:54-62).

--The mocking and beating of Jesus (22:63-65).

--Jesus before the Council (22:66-71).

As Chapter 23 opens, Jesus appears before Pilate (23:1-5) and before Herod (23:6-12). He is sentenced to death and led to the place of crucifixion.

As today's reading opens, the execution party arrives at The Skull, where Jesus and the two criminals are nailed to crosses, Jesus on the center cross.

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Luke's account of the crucifixion is distinctive from Matthew and Mark in several respects.

Of particular note is the fact that neither Mark nor Matthew mention Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them" --nor do they mention the repentant criminal and Jesus' promise to him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

It is generally agreed that these differences most likely reflect thematic interests, that is to say, Luke's desire to emphasize forgiveness and concern for the outcast, rather than the idea that he was using a separate source from the other Gospels. (*Sermon Writer*, November 24, 2013.)

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*Forgive those who kill me, Father.*

*Be with me in Paradise, Brother.*

*Forgive. Be with me.*

Are we getting a sense of how Christ our King reigns?

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"How do you like to be managed?" a prospective employer once asked a friend of mine. She replied, "I don't like to be managed." It's probably obvious that she did not get that job.

Still, I expect most of us can understand her answer, though we might have been more subtle in the way we responded to the question.

But the point is, especially for those of us who live here, we like to believe we are free—free to travel, free to say yes or no, free to choose our leaders, free to believe as we wish.

We U.S. Americans don't like to “be managed.”

The idea of someone holding sovereign authority over us might chafe. Not to mention the fact that this nation in which we live was created as the result of a War of Independence to free it from the perceived tyranny of England's King George III.

No, we don't like to be managed. So the images of a King can conjure up some strong feelings about being controlled, being oppressed, being anything but free. God only knows that plenty of earthly Kings have behaved terribly. In a way, it's an unfair label to place onto Jesus, at least here and now. And yet, all we have to do is read the Gospels to see what kind of king, what kind of leader, our Savior is.

Bible scholar William Barclay said it beautifully: “In Jesus we see perfectly displayed the mind of God....This is God from beginning to end, saying ‘I love you like that; you can batter me, you can bruise me, you can forsake me, you can crown me with thorns, you can treat me with injustice, you can scourge me -- I love you, nothing will stop my loving you.’”

*Forgive those who kill me, Father.*

*Be with me in Paradise, Brother.*

*Forgive. Be with me.*

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Earlier we heard the wonderful story of the monarchy in England during the Great War. King George VI and the Queen Mum went out and about among the poorest of the poor to check on their welfare following the bombing of London.

The Queen Mum felt a sense of compassion for those whose homes were bombed. She was proud to be able to look them in the eye—bombing victim to bombing victim, equals, fellow sufferers.

As incredible and heart-warming as that story may be, it doesn't begin to touch the story of Christ as King.

It doesn't compare to the story of a king who came to earth, who left the place of perfection, to join us here in our imperfection.

Listen to these familiar words from Eucharistic Prayer A:  
*Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all. [Jesus] stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.*

There is no earthly king or queen, no royalty of any land now or in the past, whose actions on behalf of their people even remotely compares with the sacrifice of God the Father, who sent an only son, to join us here, to live among us, to die a death worse than most of us will face—in order to be in relationship,

to show us love and forgiveness, to teach us about the importance of caring for the least among us and the value of including the outcast.

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Even in his agonizing last moments, Christ our King was thinking of others:

*Forgive those who kill me, Father.*

*Be with me in Paradise, Brother.*

*Forgive.*

*Be with me.*

*Amen.*