

Christ the King Sunday – November 23, 2025

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

New Song Episcopal Church – Coralville, IA

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On this day the church celebrates Christ the King. Of all the feast days, this one is the newest, only established a hundred years ago.

In 1925, Pope Pius XI established this festival in the wake of the first World War and the end of all four major monarchies in mainland Europe. With the rise of secularism and ultra-nationalism, the pope wished to emphasize the kingship and reign of Christ. Christ the King was celebrated on the last Sunday of October until 1970 when it was moved in the Catholic Church and most liturgical denominations to the final Sunday of the church year.

A hundred years later we find ourselves on this feast in our current context.

One might wonder what the church possibly could say on a day like this particularly as Christians in the U.S., in a land of “No King” protests and ICE raids, with a president who has posted on social media numerous AI generated images of himself wearing a crown as a king.

In many ways, it seems too easy to draw parallels, to place myself and like-minded individuals on the right side of this issue & feel pretty good about trying to combat the cruelty we see. However, this gospel from Luke leads me in a different direction. Instead of it highlighting typical symbols of kingly rule and authority, we encounter a very different image of Jesus; as a condemned criminal in his last moments before dying on a cross.

In this scene, we see Jesus executed between two criminals in a public space outside the walls of Jerusalem. Here, stripped of clothing and his dignity and forced to endure horrific pain, the Romans seek to make an example of him to all who pass by. In turn, the religious leaders, the soldiers, & a fellow criminal taunt Jesus. Jesus has lost and he will lose his life. In this final act of humiliation, they, as the victors, seemingly get the final word. They get to decide the insignificance of his life.

The religious leaders scoff, “Let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one. The soldiers in charge of his execution jeer, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Each challenges Jesus to prove this title by saving himself from certain death. In their eyes, he must demonstrate his power and authority by beating them at their own game. He must outmuscle, outwit, and outfox his opponents to save himself and live to fight another day. This is the only way, in their minds, that Jesus legitimately could be considered the Messiah or a King.

However, Jesus never planned on playing their game. He wasn’t interested in saving himself. In fact, doing so would have been contrary to much of his teaching. Earlier in Luke’s gospel, Jesus declared, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” There was something far bigger at stake for Jesus than saving his own skin.

Jesus taught that the first great commandment was to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. The second great commandment was to love your neighbor as yourself. Often this second command is understood as to love your neighbor **in the same way** that you love yourself, which itself is a rather heavy lift for most of us. However, when Jesus says this, he understands this on an even deeper level. You are to love your neighbor as yourself because you & your neighbor are not separate but interconnected. We are all one. To love your neighbor is to love a part of yourself. Being good to your neighbor benefits you as well as benefiting your neighbor. Vice versa, if your neighbor suffers, you too are diminished and suffer with them.

Jesus believed this truth and lived it in all that he did. It was the motivation behind his care for the poor and the ostracized. It inspired his interaction with women, children, strangers, and those outside his faith. Especially now, as he headed to the cross, Jesus knew that he must live this truth in the most difficult of situations. He is to live as one with those who betray him, those who torture him, & those who mock him as he dies. He must, in his own words, “Love his enemies; do good to those who hate him; bless those who curse him and pray for those who mistreat him.”

For by doing so, he will fully live this truth. He will embody the love & forgiveness of God. He will be merciful just as his heavenly Father is merciful.

As the religious leaders, the soldiers, and one of the criminals derided him, Jesus did not react out of anger or revenge. He didn't seek to save himself.

Instead, he prayed, asking God to forgive them for they did not know what they were doing. As the second criminal asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom, Jesus promised that this condemned man would be with him in Paradise.

By loving and forgiving others to his final breath, I don't think Jesus sought to win the title of King or Messiah. What I do believe is that he trusted the oneness he had with God and his oneness with all humanity. This oneness included those who were harming him and all those who would seek to follow him as his disciples. By his becoming the embodiment of love and forgiveness, he knew that it not only would help him, but it would help them and us.

As those bearing the name of Christ who are one with him, Jesus empowers us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Through him, we can more fully live the truth that we are all one. We don't have to be constricted by the need to save ourselves.

All life breathes together and all life benefits from the love and forgiveness we offer others no matter how small or inconsequential the act may seem.

We may never know love's full impact, but with every kind word, every grudge we do not harbor, every act of generosity or patience, every time we consider another person's needs before our own, Jesus' love and forgiveness breaks anew into the world.

And the world is changed for the better.

We more fully live in the kingdom of God and broaden its reach as we love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

On this Christ the King, my prayer is that we can live the truth that we are all one as Jesus did and follow his example of love and forgiveness. May this be so, Lord, especially when the good and benefit we bring is painfully hidden.

May we never justify closing our hearts.

Help us to trust that love is always the answer; that, in the end, love will win even if we or Jesus cannot save ourselves in the process.

May your kingdom come, O Lord, and may your love be known in all the world.