

The Throne

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Reign of Christ (C)
November 24, 2019

Text: Luke 23:33-43

This past Sunday, Netflix dropped season 3 of *The Crown*, and I have been slowly working through the episodes over the last few days. The series is a captivating account of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, who as a British monarch holds an odd form of power—she’s lifted up and held in great esteem, but at the same time, she’s constrained by constitutional traditions and the constantly changing expectations of her people. In one episode, the queen is shown pretending to weep when visiting grieving families after a mining disaster, confessing later that she is not genuinely moved by tragedy in the same way as others, and wondering whether her people deserve a monarch who can truly empathize with their pain. I love the show and the way it explores duty, character, and power playing out across historical events. And the grand palace sets, reflecting not only the wealth, but the remoteness of the British monarchy, are a sight to behold!

There was a time when kings and queens were a law unto themselves. When a prince or king or queen said how it was going to be, that’s how it was. King Charles I famously said that “princes are not bound to give account of their actions, but to God alone....”¹ In other words, they are accountable to no other human being. If all people form a pyramid, with superiors above and subjects below, kings stood at the top, with only God above them. In practice, they had to play the game of politics like any other head of state: Charles I failed to appreciate this, and he lost his head for it. But the kingly ideal, the image you had to live up to in order to be seen as a real king, meant doing exactly what you wanted, when you wanted, how you wanted, and beating back any challenge to your authority. It meant being powerful, taking charge, getting your way.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday. It’s the occasion in the church year when we recognize Jesus as our sovereign, or king. But he’s a funny kind of king, a king like no other in human history. He’s a king whose throne is... the cross. He’s a king who won his kingdom not on a battlefield, but in a place of execution. He’s a king who triumphs only by giving up everything he has, even his life. What kind of king is this? And what difference does it make to claim him as *our* king?

The religious authorities, the native leaders of Jerusalem, didn’t believe Jesus was a king. They had worked things out with the Romans—so long as they kept order, they could be in charge. There were people who hoped for a military leader to overthrow the Romans and bring back an independent Jewish kingdom. Maybe if the right person came along, someone with wealth and political influence—someone with an army, for sure—these leaders might fall in line. But to them Jesus was a joke. Messiah? Would God’s Messiah get himself crucified? “Let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, God’s chosen one!” To them the cross was the ultimate proof that Jesus couldn’t be the Messiah, couldn’t be God’s chosen one. A real king might die a heroic death on the

1 “The King’s Declaration showing the causes of the late Dissolution,” March 10, 1628/9.

battlefield. He doesn't get nailed to a cross.

The Romans didn't believe Jesus was a king. Sure, they wrote it as an inscription on his cross. But that was a sarcastic joke with a nasty political bite. What they meant to say was, "Anybody who thinks they want to be 'king of the Jews,' pay attention: This is what will happen to you." Crucifixion was the Romans' way of keeping their boot on the neck of their subject peoples. It was a way of showing—a way of *proving*—who was boss. It was an argument that could not be answered. "If you are the King of the Jews," the soldiers taunted, "save yourself!" Where were his troops, his followers? This was no king. A real king, a king who could go toe to toe with Caesar in Rome, wouldn't have been abandoned to die with criminals outside the city gates.

Even one of the two criminals being crucified with Jesus piles on: "Aren't you supposed to be the Messiah? Get us out of here, Messiah-man!" If you were drawing up a list, if you were keeping score of all the things in favor or against Jesus being a king, you probably would have put his crucifixion in the "against" column. It was an excruciating and humiliating way to die. Real kings don't get nailed to a cross with common criminals.

And yet there is a minority report from the gospel story. The other criminal next to Jesus takes the first one to task: "Haven't you learned anything? We put ourselves in this position. But he did nothing wrong." The second criminal looks at Jesus suffering next to him. He sees the same reality as the first, the same event. But he reaches a different conclusion. It is exactly because Jesus is suffering willingly, as an innocent, that makes him king. The criminal says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He believes that Jesus is a king, that what he's doing here is not losing his fight, but winning it. The second criminal sees the same things as everyone else, but he draws a different conclusion: Jesus is the king, the Messiah, who defeats his enemies not with armies and violence, but through suffering alongside guilty and broken people. Jesus is the king who conquers with a loving offering of himself, of his life.

It's the same reality, but two different conclusions. It's the same crucifixion, and for some it puts the nail in the coffin to Jesus' claim to be king, while for others it becomes proof positive that this is the Messiah, God's chosen one. Is Jesus king or isn't he? The cross is the deciding factor, and it's how we see the cross—whether through merely human eyes or the eyes of faith—that determines how we answer that question.

I want to suggest to you that it's no accident that God granted this insight to a condemned man. Luke's gospel is full of examples of God putting divine wisdom on the hearts and lips of unlikely witnesses. The shepherds who heard the news from the angels about Jesus' birth were forbidden from giving testimony in court. Their word wasn't good enough for the people who held power. And even in the disciple community, when the women went to the tomb on Easter Sunday, when they told the men among Jesus' followers that the tomb was empty, the men dismissed their report as "fake news." Everywhere we turn, God is placing truth on the lips of those who are prone to being dismissed and disbelieved by those who hold power in the world. And so we're left with this inescapable question lingering over Luke's story about Jesus: Whose testimony, whose experience, whose insight do we and our institutions ignore or dismiss, so that we fail to perceive God's saving work?

This week Barkley Calkins and I joined one of the other ministers from our presbytery as she visited a group home here in Allendale, where women with developmental disabilities are housed and cared for. And the other pastor read scripture and prayed and played music for the residents. They don't have language to communicate or respond, but they responded in their own way—by dancing, by shouting, by shaking the rhythm instruments the pastor had brought. Friends to

Friends Community Church in Ridgewood welcomes these women and so many others like them to a worship service on Sunday evenings, but I was sad to hear from the other pastor that the people like them haven't always been welcomed in the churches they've visited. If God brings the good news to shifty shepherds, to women not taken seriously by the men in their lives, to a condemned man hanging on a cross, if the Bible itself shows us that it's through the people we discount or shove aside that God's salvation is being revealed, then how is it that so many Christian communities find it difficult to make space for people with disabilities or children or others who, because of who they are, worship differently than what we're accustomed to? Doesn't this story of the minority report from the crucifixion remind us, together with so many others, that we need their witness?

The apostle Paul writes, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). Jesus is king in a way that it looks like the peak of foolishness to us when we feel strong and in control. Jesus is king in a way that only those who are vulnerable and cast aside can see. He told the leaders of his day that the people they most despised, the tax collectors and sinners, were going ahead of them into God's kingdom. He told his disciples that they must become like a little child in order to enter the realm of God. The cross is foolishness to those who want to hold onto power and privilege in the world. But to the sinner, to the refugee, to the homeless, to the poor and outcast, it is the throne of King Jesus.

Living in the time and place where we are, we have a lot going for us, and that makes it hard, exceedingly hard, to see Jesus as the sovereign he is, to find hope in his story. But it's not impossible. I want to invite you to think of a time of really great hardship for you. Maybe you served as active duty military personnel in combat. Maybe you've experienced an illness or a faltering relationship. It might be something you're going through right now. If you were to ask yourself the question, "Does God love me?", if you were to tally up all the points in favor and the points against, where would you put this experience? Would it be a plus or a minus? Do you tell yourself, "Because of this, among other things, I know God loves me," or do you say, "In spite of this, God loves me." Do you trust in God *in spite of* the suffering in your life?

I want to suggest today that the way you tally up your hardships and struggles and suffering might be your avenue for recognizing Jesus as king, and for finding the hope that comes with this realization. The criminals on the cross next to Jesus were suffering. But one of them looked differently at what was happening. Jesus doesn't deserve to suffer and die. And yet here he is, wading into the thick of it, hanging from the cross alongside two criminals: "This man has done nothing wrong!" he says. He didn't have to do this. God didn't have to stick it out with us. God could have washed God's hands of us. And yet wherever we are suffering, wherever we are hurting, God is right there in Jesus hurting alongside us. And that's how Jesus wins. He finds the place where God ought to be most absent and fills it to overflowing with God's presence. He takes stock of all the stuff that ought to count against God's love and care for us, everything we put in our minus column, and he shows up there, where we least expect it, and puts himself through our pain. The ultimate trump card that Rome has, that any oppressor has, that the devil has, is death. And yet even in death Jesus is right there beside us. Jesus singlehandedly disarms Caesar and all tyrants of the forces of brokenness that make them so terrifyingly powerful. And that's how he wins. That's how his cross becomes a throne. That's what makes him our king and Lord and Savior. That's what makes him worthy of our trust.

On the last, worst day of the criminal's life, Jesus says to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." When we confess our brokenness, when we realize that in spite of—no, *within*—our brokenness Jesus is there suffering beside us, we have the chance to claim him as our king, as the one who can promise and give us paradise when we least expect or deserve it. May our Lord and King rule in and among us now and forever. Amen.