

**Year C: Proper 29b Jer 23:1-6; Cant 16; Col 1:11-20; Lk 23:33-43  
St. Barnabas, Florissant – November 24, 2019**

**Focus Sentence:** Jesus is NOT the kind of King the world expects.

### **Sermon**

**I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....**

This Sunday is the last Sunday of the church year, the end of the long, green season after Pentecost, which began back in June, and it's often called Christ the King Sunday. Before we start over with another Advent season and celebrate the birth of the infant Jesus at Christmas, the church likes to provide us with a vision of just what kingly power and authority looks like through the lens of Jesus Christ's kingly reign.

It's been my experience that, every year, this feast day raises lots of questions and issues. Particularly for us Americans, the whole concept of kings and queens and other royalty is extremely foreign and puzzling to us. But this year, the Gospel reading from Luke is particularly troublesome. After all, Luke is describing the execution of Jesus as a criminal on the cross, and who wants to have their king, their leader, depicted in such a shameful and degrading way? The picture of Jesus as King, at first glance, looks only like defeat and irony.

We're no different, really, from Jesus' original followers. After all, they expected Jesus to reign as a political monarch, the anointed Messiah, the successor to the great King David, who, they hoped, would "make Israel great again." Today, we too expect our leaders to be tough, strong, ready to take on any enemy and come out victorious.

**PAUSE**

And remember that, only a few days before the events Luke describes today, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem amid the cries of “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.” The crowds were ready for Jesus to be a charismatic king.

Yet, we’re meant to know that Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross is the ultimate expression of his kingship, emphasizing his connection with suffering humanity, but also with his divinity.

So, what *are* we to make of all this on Christ the King Sunday?

### **PAUSE**

As Jesus is being crucified, his first words from the cross, as recorded in Luke’s Gospel, are “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Even in his terrible suffering, Jesus asks not retribution, but that God grant forgiveness to his tormentors and to those who reject his kingdom of gentleness and love out of their own ignorance.

Crucifixion, of course, was a brutal means of execution for the worst of criminals and was thought to be a deterrent to crime and rebellion. Thus, a sign would be posted on the cross describing the victim’s offense. The inscription over Jesus’ cross read, “This is the King of the Jews.” He had been accused of blasphemy against God and treason against Rome; thus, these words were intended to be an insult to him as well as a deterrent to other would-be rebels. Of course, it’s the epitome of irony that the full power and authority of Jesus’ real kingship is most fully shown by the powerlessness of the cross.

As Jesus hung on the cross, the crowd mocked him, saying that if he really were the King of the Jews, if he really were the Messiah, he should come down from the cross and save himself. But we should remember that, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus resisted the temptation to worldly power by the devil in the desert and chose instead to follow the will of his heavenly Father, as he came to realize his mission was to save others and not himself.

Luke tells us that two other criminals were crucified with Jesus, and Luke alone of the Gospel writers records their conversation. The first man joins with the crowd in mocking Jesus and says, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and save us!" This man was only interested in his own well-being, and personifies the attitude of the people who followed Jesus only for what they hoped to gain from a powerful Messiah figure.

In stark contrast, the words of the second criminal have been sometimes described as "the gospel within the Gospel." Recognizing his own sin and the contrasting innocence of Jesus, he turns to Jesus with a profession of faith as he asked Jesus to remember him in his Kingdom.

Jesus answered him with an assurance of forgiveness and eternal life. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." And thus, in another touch of irony, salvation is first of all extended to a repenting criminal, who would now share eternal life with the Lord Jesus.

**PAUSE**

The whole life of Jesus, from his humble beginning in Bethlehem's stable, to his death on Calvary, provides us with an understanding of power and authority that radically differs from that of the world. With the cross as his throne, Jesus' sacrificial life and ministry were radically transformed into the ideal of true kingly power --- defined by compassion, forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life.

The real key to understanding Jesus' kingship is that it *not of this world*. Its weapons are not arms and raw power, but love; its throne is not in a royal palace, but in the hearts of all who come to know and love Jesus. And the Kingdom of God isn't just for some future time when Jesus will return in glory to judge the world. It's NOW, whenever love triumphs over selfishness, ambivalence, hatred, or just not caring.

And, so, sisters and brothers, Christ crucified IS our King Triumphant --- and we can proclaim it even amid the ironies and misunderstandings of Jesus' age and of ours. For even from the cross, Jesus can say, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

**AMEN.**