

Sermon 23 November 2025 Christ the King

Colossians 1:11-18 Luke 23:33-43

The story of the criminal hanging on the cross near Jesus, calling out to Jesus and Jesus replying, *'I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise,'* is one of the meaningful little stories that occur in the life of Jesus. It's got to be the ultimate story of repentance and forgiveness, something which we have looked at in some depth recently.

But first, let's look at this story in the light of today's theme, Christ the King. Today is the last Sunday in the Church's year, which actually begins with Advent Sunday, next Sunday. So, before we plunge into the season of Advent, a time when we prepare for the celebration of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus, the beginning of the Christian story, we remind ourselves that Christ is indeed our King, he is our Sovereign Lord.

The Old Testament prophets, and Jeremiah is a very good example, spoke out against the leaders of Israel in their day. They accused them of driving people away from faith, instead of being caring shepherds to them: *"What sorrow awaits the leaders of my people – the shepherds of my sheep – for they have destroyed and scattered the very ones they were expected to care for," says the Lord.* Jeremiah 23:1. Jeremiah then goes on to prophesy that God will step in and lead the flock himself; that a new king will arise, who will rule with justice and righteousness: *"For the time is coming," says the Lord, "when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David's line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land."* Jeremiah 23:5.

But God never does things quite as we expect. Yes, he steps in to lead his people in the person of Jesus Christ, and Jesus certainly exercises wisdom and righteousness, but there are some surprises in his new king. Firstly, he is not a king in the mould of what was expected – a warrior king who would lead Israel in a victorious conquest of all their enemies. And secondly, he ends up crucified as a common criminal. What sort of a king is this King of the Jews? Is this some kind of a joke? God's idea of kingship turns our human understanding upside down.

Jesus is a king in a new mould, who champions the lowest and the least, who spends quality time with the outcasts of society, who challenges the trappings of the Temple, who forgives rather than takes revenge, who teaches and heals. And in the end, this is a king who saves his people by sacrificing himself. This is radical kingship.

Now, there are two ways we can respond to this particular kingship, two ways as reflected in the response of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. One thief derides and mocks him: *'One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself, and us too while you're at it!"'* Luke 23:39. He represents the doubters of this world, those who ask the question, 'If there's a God, why is there all this suffering, why doesn't he do something about it?'

Then there is the response of the other thief, who faced with the suffering Christ, is overcome with guilt and asks for forgiveness and a place in Christ's Kingdom: *'Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."*' Luke 23:42.

So where do we fit into this narrative? Well, we might not be thieves in the same vein as those who were hanging on the cross, but we do carry the weight of our mistakes and our faults. We are human and we do let both ourselves and God down at times, but the good news is that despite that, God still wants us to put that behind us and reach out to him. If we can do that, we will be forgiven and the way is open for us to strengthen our relationship with him and with Christ. This is certainly something we have explored very recently.

I refer to our first reading in which Paul says, *'For God has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.'* Colossians 1:13. God wants to be part of our lives and do what he did for the thief. It means that no matter who we are, no matter our iniquities and our faults, God wants to have a relationship with us, and when that materialises, he can do wonderful things for us. I remind you of a story that is so appropriate for today's message.

The man who was Bishop of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris during the early part of last century was a great evangeliser. He tries to reach out to unbelievers and cynics. He liked to tell the story of a young

man who would stand outside the cathedral and shout derogatory slogans at people entering to worship. He called them fools and all kinds of names. The people tried to ignore him but it was difficult.

One day, the parish priest went outside to confront the young man, much to the distress of the parishioners. The young man ranted and raved against everything the priest told him. Finally, he said the scoffer, 'Look, let's get this over with once and for all. I'm going to dare you to do something and I bet you can't do it.' And of course, the young man shot back, 'I can do anything you propose, you white-robed wimp!'

'Fine,' said the priest. 'All I ask you to do is to come with me into the sanctuary. I want you to stare at the figure of Christ and I want you to scream as loudly as you can, 'Christ dies for me on the cross and I don't care one bit.'

So the young man went into the sanctuary and, looking at the figure of Christ, screamed as loud as he could, 'Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit.' The priest said, 'Very good. Now do it again.' And again, the young man screamed, with a little hesitancy, 'Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit.' 'You're almost done now,' said the priest. 'Now one more time.'

The young man raised his fist, kept looking at the figure of Christ, but the words wouldn't come. He just could not look at the face of Christ and say that anymore. The real punchline came when, after he told the story, the bishop said, 'I was that young man. That young man, that defiant young man was me. I thought I didn't need God, but I found out that I did.' The question I pose, is how many of us could relate, in some way, to that young man's realisation – I thought I didn't need God, but I found out that I did.

To finish, I return to today's theme, today's celebration of Christ the King. As we embrace this notion, we also take on board this understanding that God's idea of a king, and indeed, of kingship, is not the worldly understanding of such. In Jesus, he shows us quite a different concept. For a throne, Jesus has a wooden cross. For a crown, Jesus has twisted thorns. In becoming King, Jesus demonstrates a way of servant leadership from which, I believe, both Church and the world still have much to learn.