

Gospel**Luke 23:35-43**

The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The Authority of the Meek King

On Thursday, after worshipping with the folks at St. Thomas' just up the road, I stopped at the grocery store to pick up some last minute items for our Thanksgiving dinner. I zoomed around with my shopping cart, trying to find the chicken broth and some walnuts. Every time I passed the center aisle of seasonal stuff, I noticed that every item was all about Christmas. Plates, napkins, cups, jingle bells, snow globes, all of it was Christmas stuff. In our culture, we can't get through Thanksgiving Day without jumping right to Christmas. In the church calendar, we have one week left before we enter into the season of Advent. Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, and it is known as the Sunday we celebrate *Christ the King*. It may seem a little bit strange, while the rest of the world is dusting off nativity scenes, and making sure the Christmas lights from last year still work – we will spend this morning at the foot of the cross pondering how a man sentenced to death is also the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Many people in first century Palestine were looking for the coming of the Messiah. They wanted God to send someone to restore the Promised Land to them and thus affirm the covenant of Moses. They wanted God to send someone to overthrow the Romans who were oppressive and frighteningly powerful. They wanted God to send someone to rescue them, to save them, to proclaim the day of the Lord's favor. Many people imagined that the Messiah would be a king who would free them from occupation by other nations and establish God's kingdom on earth, taking up residence on the royal throne of David. The messianic king would be so powerful and wonderful, that all other nations would flock to Jerusalem to become part of this kingdom and thus peace will be brought to the world.

It is a wonderful image of God's power on earth. Even Jesus was tempted by this image of messianic hope when he spent forty days in the wilderness right after his baptism. He considered the possibility that being the Son of God meant becoming the king over all the nations of the earth. Instead, Jesus discovered a different kind of authority. Jesus discovered the authority of meekness. Before I describe the power of a meek king, I want to be sure we all understand meekness. We usually equate the word meek with the word weak. But the two words describe quite different situations. A person who is weak is lacking in some kind of strength. You can be physically weak, and lack muscle or mentally weak, and lack brain power. But a person who is meek has muscle and chooses not to use it, or has brain power and chooses not to dominate others. This understanding of the word meek was shared with me by one of my seminary professors, Dr. Deirdre Good, and it has profoundly changed my understanding of Jesus'

unlimited power and authority as the Son of God, and his choice not to use that power for anything but healing and forgiveness.

Today, Luke takes us to the foot of the cross surrounded by a crowd of onlookers who watch Jesus as he slowly dies from suffocation. He has been condemned to death as a political traitor to Rome, and the sign above his head reads, King of the Jews. The leaders and the soldiers taunt Jesus to save himself. They tease him to use his kingly and messianic powers to save himself from this humiliating and painful death. Surely a real king, a real messiah would not allow himself to be executed. He would call on the angelic army, he would have brought vengeance on those who tried to execute him, he would have exercised his divine authority and crushed the authority of the Sanhedrin and Rome.

But Jesus is a different kind of king. He is a meek king. A king with unlimited power *and* the unlimited discipline not to use it to overpower anyone – even those who would destroy him. When we imagine a king, we usually imagine a man in charge of a nation and a particular realm that we could describe with a map. Jesus wanders from place to place and declares no political leadership, and yet crowds of people flock to hear his voice and be touched by his hands. A king has an army complete with weapons and armor. Jesus has disciples without a change of clothes and no extra sandals. A king has a castle to keep him safe. Jesus lodges with whoever will offer him hospitality for the night. A king is able to overthrow his enemies with force. Jesus is able to forgive his enemies with love.

Jesus' extreme meekness, the fact that he exercises such incredible restraint in the face of his own death, just shows us how vast his power really is. If Jesus were to flex his divine muscles to save himself, then who would be left standing? If Jesus fought back, even his disciples would suffer his wrath since they have abandoned him, denied him, and run away. We have seen evidence of Jesus power when he used it to heal and forgive others. We know he can do miracles to feed the hungry and raise the dead. But today, the cross has become his throne because *he chooses* not to use his power to stop the crucifixion.

The two thieves who hang on either side of him both want him to be a king. The one thief wants Jesus to be a worldly king and use his power to save himself and the thief. The second thief recognizes the kind of king that Jesus really is, and he is transformed by Jesus' divine authority. He rebukes the first thief, "Have you no shame? Don't you fear God?" He recognizes that Jesus' innocent death is in fact a sign of his divine power and authority. Only the messiah could suffer so much at the hands of men, and simultaneously forgive them for what they are doing. That is true power and authority.

The second thief asks, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Somehow, this man, hanging on the cross with Christ, about to suffocate and die himself, is able to see that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. In our protestant Episcopal leanings, we tend to focus on the resurrection cross, the one without the body of Jesus hanging upon it. But today, we are invited to join with the thief and look upon the battered body of a man accused, convicted, and executed and see the king of kings. It flies in the face of every human image of power and authority, but there Jesus is transforming our image of a king, reigning from the cross and using his power to forgive and heal the world.

I have an important disclaimer to insert at this moment. In no way do I want to give the impression that sacrificial suffering is to be glorified. No one should believe that it is their Christian duty to suffer at the hands of another. This kind of poor theology has been used to

keep people in situations of domestic violence, slavery, and oppression for too long. Jesus' suffering on the cross is not encouragement to be treated like a doormat. Jesus' suffering is an unfortunate consequence of our human brokenness. Jesus suffers death on the cross because that is the way that humanity chooses to restore peace – by executing the one disturbing the status quo. It is the resurrection that transforms the cross into a symbol of salvation. Suffering alone is never enough. But that is another sermon.

As Christians, we join with the thief and ask Jesus to remember us in his kingdom so that we too might live with him in Paradise. We want to be subjects in a kingdom that is ruled by love, healing, and forgiveness. We want to live in a realm that has no borders, instead it travels with us, appearing wherever two or three are gathered and Christ the king is there. It is a kingdom where all people are restored to unity with God and each other through the rule of Jesus, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.