

A Kingdom Like No Other

Luke 23:33–43 — Christ the King Sunday

There's a phrase that pops up every now and then in our country — you may have heard it. People will gather for a march or hold up signs for something they call “**No Kings Day.**” It's basically a public way of saying, *We don't do kings here.*” And honestly, it makes sense. It's kind of built into our national DNA. We started off with “No thanks, King George,” and we've been wary of crowns ever since.

We like elections, not coronations. Presidents, not princes.
That's just who we are as Americans.

And yet... every year, right around this time, the Church hands us a Sunday with a very different message. Today we celebrate **Christ the King Sunday** — the final Sunday of the Christian year. It's the Church's way of saying, “Actually... there *is* a King. A real one. A true one. And His reign looks nothing like the kings of this world.”

There's a reason Christ the King Sunday was created in the first place. It's not that pastors were running out of themed Sundays and thought, “Well, we've got Trinity Sunday... and Pentecost... might as well try kings next.” No. It was established in 1925, at a time when nations were turning toward dictators, nationalism was rising, and people were putting their hope in human power. The Church felt the need to say — gently but clearly — “**No human kingdom gets the final say. Christ alone is King.**”

But here's the twist.
Here's the tension I want us to carry this morning:

**The Gospel reading chosen for Christ the King Sunday is not about a throne, a crown, or a royal procession.
It's about a crucifixion.**

Of all the Scriptures the Church could have chosen to talk about Jesus' kingship, this is the one: Jesus hanging on a cross between two criminals.

Not exactly the coronation moment we would expect.

And maybe that's the point.

1. A King Like No Other (vv. 33–38)

Let's start where Luke starts — at the place called “The Skull.” Criminals on either side. The sound of hammers. Soldiers dividing up clothing like it's a yard sale. The smell of blood and sweat. It is a grim, ugly scene.

And then there's this — a sign hammered above Jesus' head:
“This is the King of the Jews.”

Meant as mockery.

Meant to humiliate.

Meant to say, “Here's your king. Look how powerless he is.”

But that sign tells the truth the soldiers don't know.

Even in sarcasm, they declare the thing they cannot see:

This really is the King.

This really is His coronation.

This really is the moment His kingdom breaks open.

A few months ago, many people tuned in to watch the coronation of King Charles III. The gold coaches, the jewels, the crowns worth millions, the choirs echoing through Westminster Abbey. Everything polished, planned, and rehearsed to perfection.

Luke 23 is... the opposite.

There is no gold, only blood.

No crown jewels, only thorns.

No velvet robes, only a back torn open by whips.

No royal procession, only a stumbling walk under the weight of a cross.

No scepter, only nails.

And yet —

And yet —

Luke insists: **This is the coronation of the world's true King.**

If you want a “gee whiz” comparison, think about this:

- King Charles had 7,000 troops lining the streets.
- Jesus had Roman soldiers mocking Him.
- Charles sat on a throne used for 700 years.
- Jesus was lifted onto a cross used for thousands of executions.
- Charles was surrounded by the powerful and important.
- Jesus was surrounded by criminals and skeptics.
- Charles had jewels passed down through generations.
- Jesus had only the words, “Father, forgive them.”

This is a different kind of King.
And thank God for that.

A Moment Worth Noticing: “We Have No King but Caesar.”

Before we leave this part of the story, there’s a line spoken earlier in the trial that echoes loudly here on Christ the King Sunday.

When Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd, he asks, “Shall I crucify your king?”
And the people — along with the religious leaders — respond:

“We have no king but Caesar.”

Think about that.

God’s own people — who prayed to be delivered from oppressive rulers — declared allegiance to the very emperor whose soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross. They were willing to trade the true King for the convenience of the moment.

And history tells us why:

People will follow any king
who promises power,
or stability,
or control,
or the illusion of safety.

That’s why through the centuries, rulers have claimed divine titles. Pharaohs called themselves gods. Roman emperors demanded worship. Medieval kings ruled by “divine right,” as if their authority came straight from heaven. Even modern totalitarian regimes elevate their leaders to near-religious status.

The temptation is always the same:
to seize power, to cling to status, to reach for glory —
to place ourselves where only God belongs.

But Christ’s kingdom breaks that pattern completely.
He does not climb upward; He descends downward.
He does not demand allegiance; He offers forgiveness.
He does not cling to life; He gives it away.

**And it is in that self-giving moment
that the true nature of His kingdom is revealed —
not in a palace, but between two criminals.**

2. A Kingdom Like No Other (vv. 39–42)

So let us turn to the two criminals. Same location. Same suffering. Same Jesus beside them. But they see Him in two completely different ways.

The first criminal joins the crowd in mocking Jesus:
“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself — and us!”

He wants a king on his own terms.
A king who proves himself through power.
A king who aligns with his agenda.

If Jesus won't do that, then Jesus must not be king.

The other criminal — the one we sometimes call the “good thief” — has no illusions. He knows he's guilty. He knows he cannot save himself. He doesn't demand anything. He doesn't bargain. He doesn't promise to do better.

He simply says:
“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

There it is.
The simplest, truest prayer in Scripture.
No credentials.
No resume.
No theological statement.
Just trust.

Where in your life do you need to pray that simple prayer again — not with polished words, but with an honest heart?

While the world mocks Jesus, a dying thief sees a King.
While the crowds demand proof, he sees mercy.
While others see defeat, he sees a door to the kingdom opening.

He sees what no one else sees:

**The cross is the throne.
The suffering is the coronation.
This moment — this terrible moment — is where the kingdom begins.**

Sometimes all we can manage in life is the thief's prayer:
“Jesus, remember me.”
And the miracle is this:
That's enough.

3. A Promise Like No Other (v. 43)

Jesus replies:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

And that word **“today”** matters. Luke loves that word.

It shows up at every key moment of salvation in his Gospel:

- **“Today** in the town of David a Savior is born.”
- **“Today** this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”
- **“Today** salvation has come to this house.”
- And now: **“Today** you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke wants us to see something:

Whenever Jesus shows up, salvation is not someday — it’s today.

Right now.

Immediate.

Present tense grace.

No delay.

No probationary period.

No hoops to jump through.

Today.

With Me.

In paradise.

It’s the first royal decree from the King on His throne —
not a throne of gold, but a throne of suffering love.

This one sentence tells us everything we need to know about Christ’s kingdom:

- It is immediate.
- It is personal.
- It is filled with grace.
- It reaches the lowest, the least, and the last.
- It begins wherever mercy triumphs over judgment.

The first person welcomed into Christ’s kingdom after the cross is a criminal.

A man with nothing to offer but a prayer.

A man whose hands were nailed down — unable to perform a single good deed.

Grace meets him anyway.

This is a King like no other.

4. Living as Citizens of This Kingdom

If Christ is King —
if the cross is His coronation —
if mercy is His scepter —
then what does it mean for us to live as His citizens?

It means we reflect the heart of the King:

- In compassion
- In forgiveness
- In humility
- In remembering the forgotten
- In serving the vulnerable
- In loving the unlovely

Citizens of this kingdom don't conquer; they **serve**.
They don't condemn; they **forgive**.
They don't cling to power; they **share grace**.

Because when we pray, "Jesus, remember me,"
we're really asking:
"Let Your kingdom come in me."

And it's worth remembering that through the centuries, Christians have often had to choose between earthly rulers and the reign of Christ. One early example is **Polycarp**, the bishop of Smyrna in the second century. When commanded to renounce Christ and proclaim Caesar as lord, Polycarp refused. His famous words still echo: *Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King?* For that allegiance, he paid with his life.

But the early church understood something vital:
There are rulers in this world — but only one true King.
And their allegiance to Him shaped their lives, their courage, and their hope.

Closing Reflection: From "No Kings" to the One True King

So here we are.

Just days after our country held its own little “No Kings” moments — marches, gatherings, signs, rallies... all saying, “We don’t want anyone ruling over us.”

And today, the Church says something tender and bold:

There is a King.

But not the kind you fear.

Not the kind who dominates or demands.

Not the kind who takes power for Himself.

This King gives His life for the world.

This King rules with mercy.

This King remembers the forgotten.

Christ the King Sunday reminds us that:

- Human rulers rise and fall
- Nations flourish and fade
- Crowns glitter and tarnish
- Leaders make promises they cannot keep
- Kings and governments often try to play god

But only Christ is God.

And His throne is a cross.

So today we stand with the thief —
with empty hands, honest hearts, and a simple prayer:

“Jesus, remember me.”

And the King replies every time:

“Today... you are with me.”

This is a kingdom like no other.

Amen.

Closing Prayer (Revised)

Lord Jesus Christ, our true and gracious King,
thank You for a kingdom built not on power, but on mercy;
not on fear, but on love.

Teach us to live with the trust of the thief who prayed, "Remember me."
Shape our hearts to follow You above every earthly claim on our allegiance.
May Your compassion guide our words,
Your forgiveness shape our actions,
and Your kingdom take root in us and through us.

Reign in us, Lord Christ—
today and always.
Amen.