November 23, 2025

Reign of Christ Sunday

Sermon

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Has anyone here ever met the King? (King Charles, I mean.) Or did anyone ever meet our late Queen Elizabeth? Most people haven't, although you're more likely to meet the Sovereign than you were, say, 100 years ago. Many centuries ago, when kings flitted around their kingdoms, suppressing troublesome nobles and leading their troops into battle along the borders of their kingdoms, it was not unheard of to see the king at a local inn. That sort of boots-on-the-ground kingship can be dangerous, though. In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the unlucky king laments what often happens to kings:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives: some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court…

No wonder that, when politics settle down and monarchies start to work hand and hand with democracy – even to be a safeguard *of* democracy – no wonder that kings have generally found it best to keep a certain aloofness, for everyone's sake. When the crown descends too often into the mess of common politics, it's sure to get tarnished. If you watched the TV series, *The Crown*, you'll know that one of the recurrent themes for the monarchy in the 20th and 21st century is the question of how much to be involved and how much to stay apart. Should the Crown make a statement or not make a statement? How much should be shared with the press and how much should be kept hidden? What are the boundaries between personal and public?

In every generation of our reigning family there seems to be one member who likes to…experiment with those boundaries – no names mentioned. But in general, although we might complain that His Majesty is too hoity-toity, when it comes down to it, you probably wouldn't actually want to meet him at the Bogside having a pizza and a beer. It might be fun for the first half hour or so, but sooner or later it would start to feel a bit uncomfortable. You'd rather he stayed a little more distant and be just a little less human. Do we actually want to know what our Head of State takes on his pizza? No, we usually like our kings to be just a bit aloof. You want the Crown to have a healthy amount of detachment from everyday life. Not too detached, but a little bit. That gives the Crown a kind of dignity and reliability. We like our kings and queens to keep to the royal script, and they generally do. If you listen to the royal Christmas message every year, you're not doing for the novelty of what might come out of the King's mouth. You know he's sticking to a very carefully crafted script, and we know that's probably for the best – that steady tradition is part of the point.

But not every king sticks to the script. In Luke's account of the crucifixion, just in that short passage we heard today, Jesus is upbraided no fewer than three times for not sticking to the

script. As the people stand watching the horror of that Friday, it says that first "the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' Then the soldiers mocked him: 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' And then we're told that "one of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'" In other words, "No, no, no, Jesus. Cut! This isn't how it's supposed to be. Stick to the script, please. This doesn't happen to the king; didn't you read your part? You're not supposed to get crucified! This rejection, this humiliation, this torture, this death – that's not part of your stage directions. That would be absurd. Go back behind the curtain and try again. Start from Chapter 1, when Zechariah held your baby cousin John in his arms and told us about how God "has raised up for us a mighty saviour in the house of his servant David." Take it from verse 78: "the dayspring from on high shall break upon us." That's you. What are you doing in this darkness? Back up and start again, please. For crying out loud, you're not even in this scene. This is the least important scene in the whole show (I don't even know why it's in the script), this bit about two criminals getting executed outside the city. Get back to Jerusalem, back to the palace where you belong, and practise your speech from the throne. I'll just bump off Rosencrantz and Guildenstern here, these two nobodies, and meet you back there.

As much as we talk about being close to God, being friends with Jesus, as much as we talk about Emmanuel, "God with Us," do we really want God to be with us like that? Dying on a cross? We want God to save us, but not like this. We don't want God to go through the same junk that we are going through, we want God to quietly reach down from heaven and pluck us out of danger. We want a God who will sign a royal decree that will make the diagnosis change, make the grief vanish, make the worry go to sleep. We want a God who will send us a sign to guide us, not a God who will come down and *be* a sign. Bring the crown out of the palace and it will get tarnished, or stolen, or just lose its mystique.

Look at the thieves on their crosses. It's one thing to want God with us to stand up for us when we're innocent, but what about when we are guilty? When we are being tormented and humiliated because of our own bad decisions? When, as the one thief says, "we have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds." When we want nothing other than to crawl under a rock and be left alone, in that nakedness, that humiliation and disgrace – the very feelings that crucifixion was designed to amplify – do we really want the King to be with us?

Probably not. If we knew King Charles would be visiting, we would stick to the script; we would dress up in our finest clothes, we would learn how to address him properly, how to bow, how to set the table properly. We'd want him to see us at our best. How much more for Christ the King? We turn God away from the really vulnerable parts of our lives. We wouldn't want to think that God should be embroiled in them. "It's very nice of you to come and be with me, but I'd rather you stayed away and helped me from a distance. Change the law for me, or set up a charitable foundation for me. You don't belong in this scene. Stick to the script, please. Go back behind the curtain and start over. Start from the prophet Jeremiah's line, that part about the Good Shepherd, the "righteous branch" who will "reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." That's my kind of king."

But Jesus says, "No, no, no. This is exactly where I belong. I was born for this scene. These thieves on the cross, these petty criminals getting their comeuppance – the despised,

rejected, the people of sorrow and grief, the people from whom everyone looking averts their eyes in embarrassment – these are my people. My kingdom begins precisely here. This is where I have chosen to be, with these two nobodies. This is the most important scene in the whole show; right here is the key to my kingdom.

Each of the four gospels gives a somewhat different version of Jesus' crucifixion and what he said from the cross. When you combine them all together, you get the seven sayings from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I am thirsty. It is finished." And so on. This being the last Sunday of this lectionary year's readings in the Gospel of Luke, we should pay attention to the way Luke tells the story. And whereas the other gospels tell us about Jesus' vertical conversations, so to speak – the things he said down to the people watching below, and the things he said above to the one he calls Father, Luke gives us this extra scene of Jesus' horizontal conversation: the things he said to the people who were crucified beside him. We get this poignant scene with his last companions: the other victims, the people that the Romans nailed up as his equals. The way Luke seems to film the scene for us, it's as if all the background noise – the crying and jeering from the crowd – all dies back. The camera is no longer looking up at the cross, or down onto the hillside, it's a conversational angle, level with the three men as they die together, and in that moment, their lives' inglorious ending is the most important scene in the world. Luke wants to leave us with this picture of relationship and intimacy, the unrelenting with-ness of Jesus, even and especially in places of abandonment. Our king refuses to keep to the script, this king sneaks into the scenes where he doesn't belong.

He's a bit like Henry V in Shakespeare's play. The night before the great battle, when they are so outnumbered, King Henry puts on a disguise so that he can move among his troops, talk to them and encourage them, chatting with them in their own language. Usually in Shakespeare the kings and nobles speak in poetry, that elegant blank verse with 10 syllables per line. But when the king moves among the common soldiers, he switches into the rough prose of ordinary folk.

In Luke's gospel we have something similar but different. Some people complain that people in Luke's books speak so eloquently – to the point that it doesn't seem realistic; these can't have been their real words – sometimes it's almost like they're speaking in Shakespearean verse. Sometimes people like Mary and Zechariah just break out into poetry and you have to wonder whether this is accurate. Here even the thieves seem to speak in very dignified language, as they share a private conversation with Jesus up there on their crosses. "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." It's very dignified, as if the poor man wouldn't have been gasping and cursing with the pain. But whether or not that's the way they really talked, the impression we get is an impression of dignity, and that's exactly right. When King Jesus comes to be with the humble, disgraced people of the world, like this thief on his cross, rather than talking down, like a common thief himself, the thief starts talking like a king. Because that's what Jesus does: he gives royal dignity with the least likely of people. "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

At Thane's funeral on Friday the choir sang, "In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me," and that is just what Christ does – he abides with us, even in death. You will be *with* me. Today – even today, especially today, when you die an ugly and painful death to the sound of laughter, I am with you. Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

Can we handle the unrelenting intimacy of a king like this? Can we tolerate a king who refuses to stick to the script and keep his boundaries? A king who comes and eats with us, making every common meal of bread and grape into a royal banquet? A king who claims authority over every earthly power we pay tribute to? A king who won't stay aloof in a distant palace but insists on entering every vulnerability of our broken lives? A king whose speech from the throne is seven words from a cross? A king who comes onto a hillside, before all the paparazzi, and says, "Come, watch me die with you"? A king who shares his tarnished crown with those who least deserve it, and calls us all a royal priesthood? That's the challenge of Christ the King – to let that kind of king be Lord of our lives. So come, if we dare, "for God's sake, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings."