Where Christ Is King
Luke 23:33-43

This Sunday is Christ the King Sunday, a celebration and a looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ, who will establish his Kingdom forever and ever, amen. In anticipation of that day, we celebrate his kingship today. We acknowledge that even now, while we are living in this world, we are citizens of Christ's Kingdom. He is the King of Kings, and our highest allegiance is to him. Likewise, our highest hopes are found in him.

But today, even as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, the question must be asked, "Where is Christ King?" We answer: Christ is King in Heaven. Or Christ is King in my heart. While this is true, it is a little overly simple. No, if we want to know where Christ is King, we must look to his coronation.

Jesus was born the King. Christmas is just a few weeks away, and if you haven't already you will soon see all the paraphernalia of the Christmas season. You will see plenty of nativity scenes over the next month, and you will always see shepherds and Mary and Joseph kneeling for the baby Jesus, acknowledging that they are in the presence of the King. You will probably also see the Three Wise Men in many of these nativity scenes. We know the gifts that they brought: frankincense, gold, and myrrh, gifts for a coronation. But that was not Jesus' coronation.

Years later, an adult Jesus began his ministry by traveling the Judean countryside and declaring with authority, "Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand!" He healed the sick and performed many miracles. People heard the authority in Jesus' voice, they saw his compassion for the sick and his healing hands, they witnessed the miracles he performed, and they wanted him for their king. After Jesus fed the multitude, they tried to take him by force and make him their king. But that was not Jesus' coronation.

We know of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as well. He entered Jerusalem with much fanfare, people laying their cloaks down before him, children carrying palm branches ahead of him and waving them in the air, shouting and cheering. But that was not Jesus' coronation.

No, it wasn't until a few days later, on a Friday morning, when a crown was finally placed on Jesus' head.

And so Jesus was crowned, not with gold but with thorns, and led by the guard to his throne, not to be seated above everyone else, but to hang above everyone else, to hang by the nails in his hands and his feet. He was led to the place called the Skull, and there he was crucified.

And that is where Christ is King.

This is the trouble with Christ the King: you cannot have Christ the King without the cross, and the cross is a problem. We like to sing songs like, *Crown Him With Many Crowns*, and *Majesty! Worship His Majesty*, and *Victory in Jesus*. We like to see that image of the triumphant Jesus, resplendent in glory, dressed in the finest of white robes and draped in gold with a crown of stars!

But you cannot have Christ the King apart from the cross, and the cross is a problem. Paul writes that the cross is a stumbling block and foolishness to this world, and he is right. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) When handled improperly, when approached improperly, the cross will trip you up. It will knock you down. It will make you foolish. Dr. Willie Jennings, when preaching at the service where I and my fellow Duke graduates were given glass prayer crosses, told of the first time he picked up one of these glass crosses. It cut him. A cross that cuts.

That is what the cross should do. It should cut us. It should cut us free from the sin that so ensnares our lives. It should cut our pride right out of us, like a surgeon cutting out the cancer that is killing you. It should cut our tongues when we speak words that are not righteous, and it should cut even more deeply when we try to twist the words of scripture for our own gain. The cross is a problem for us because it is not pretty, it is not simple, it is not easy, it is not pleasant, but it is necessary, because on the cross is where Christ is King.

On Jesus' coronation day, there were many present who could not overcome the problem of the cross. Their pride, their expectations, their self-centeredness, their doubt, their fear, their sin kept them from seeing the King on the cross.

Humanity is too often concerned about what they can get for themselves. As the King of Kings took his place, soldiers rolled dice for his robes, men playing games for his possessions. They asked the question we are all guilty of asking one time or another: "If this is the King, what's in it for me?"

As Jesus hung on the cross, the people stood by watching and waiting; the leaders scoffed: "He saved others; let him save himself!" They wanted a show. They wanted a spectacle. They wanted Jesus to do something big and flashy and great, as he had done so many times before, for so many others before. They, like we, became so enthralled with what big miracle Jesus might do, ought to do, that they missed his Kingdom.

As Jesus hung on the cross, soldiers offered him soured wine to drink. It was, of course, not an appropriate gift; scripture tells us this offering was a mockery to Jesus. So it is with what we try to give to Jesus, with how we try to purchase Jesus' favor or earn ourselves a higher seat at Jesus' table, maybe even at Jesus' right hand. Apart from the cross, we can offer nothing better than soured wine.

As Jesus hung on the cross, the soldiers shouted up to him, "If you really are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Prove it! If you are a King, be triumphant! Don't be a defeated king, don't be a lowly king, don't be a vagrant king. They shouted, and we echo, be the kind of King we want!

As Jesus hung on the cross, the thief hanging on the cross beside him called out, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Oh, how bitter a snare entangled this poor man. Who of us does not want to be saved from pain, from death? Who among us does not want to be delivered from the hurts, those darkest moments, that valley of the shadow of death? Too many among us have made that ultimatum to Jesus, "If you are really the king, you'll get me out of this."

But one was there who saw the King on the Cross. The other thief at Jesus' side called out, "We are rightly condemned… But this man has done nothing wrong… Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The cross was no stumbling block for this man. It was not foolishness to him. In the midst of his own anguish and suffering, the cross cut through his pride, it cut through the mocking and taunting words, it cut through the confusion and lack of understanding, it cut through the self-righteousness and the indignation, it cut through the selfishness and greed, it cut through the life this man had lived and the sin he had willfully committed, and even as he hung dying the Cross of Jesus Christ set this man free!

We likewise must cry out to Jesus, in faith, in desperation, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" And Jesus responds, "I assure you that today-" this day, the day of the cross- "today you will be with me in paradise."

Christ is King on the cross. You cannot get away from it. You cannot go around it. You cannot pave over it. Foolishness and a stumbling block to the world, but to those who are being saved, “the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18) If Christ is to be your King, he must be your King on the cross.

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