

*INRI: Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews*  
Luke 23:33-43  
November 20, 2016  
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*When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; 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."*

I was incredibly fortunate to visit Rome, Italy last month. One of the highlights was the stunning, inspirational wonder at the end of the tour of the Vatican. I had been to Rome 30 years ago, and back then, there were no lines that I remember. They have high security now, as well as hugely increased tourism. The tour started in the Vatican museum, where we saw fine sculptures from the BCE era that influenced Michelangelo. We then walked through a long hallway upon which hung tapestries depicting the life of Christ. We then were ushered into the Sistine Chapel, admiring the incredible frescoes painted by Michelangelo and others. The beauty and history was overwhelming.

From the chapel, we found our way to St. Peter's Basilica, a massive structure of architectural feats, and the tour guide said, "The 4<sup>th</sup> century basilica was remodeled in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and there was only one item that was kept. Here, follow me," she said. She walked us over to a side chapel of the giant basilica, and there, now enclosed in glass, was the most breathtaking piece of art I had ever seen. The Pieta. This is the famous sculpture of the body of Jesus on the lap of his mother, Mary, after the crucifixion. Truly it is a masterpiece. It was commissioned by a French Cardinal and was one of Michelangelo's first pieces of art, completed in his early 20s.

Pope Julius II, inspired by the Pieta, asked Michelangelo to paint the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. "Oh, I'm not a painter, I'm a sculptor," Michelangelo told him. "No, you WILL paint the frescoes on the ceiling of the chapel," was the Pope's response. That is the impact of the Pieta. The pope wanted to harness Michelangelo's amazing sensitivity, creativity, and skill shown in this brilliant piece.

Behind and above the Pieta is a large gold cross, and at the top of the cross, a sign with the letters INRI. We at the Presbyterian church have this symbol on many of our paraments, the cloth that hangs on the pulpit beneath the Bible, and I always forget what the letters represent. Our tour guide told us it is the Latin acronym for, "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews"; "I" being the first letter of the Latin word for Jesus, "N" for Nazarene, "R" for King and "I" for Jews. This is the inscription that Pilate nailed to the top of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, and the Gospel of John says the title was written in 3 languages: Aramaic, Latin and Greek, so that all of Jerusalem would be able to read it. Mark and Matthew refer to it not as a title but an accusation. "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews." There was something so profound about seeing this title, this accusation, above the crucified Jesus in his mother's lap: There was such power in the vulnerability. I won't forget the acronym again.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the day we celebrate the all-embracing authority of Christ as King and Lord of all things. It is celebrated on the final Sunday of the church year, which is today. Next week, we begin a new church year with the celebration of the first Sunday of Advent.

Pope Pius XI instituted Christ the King Sunday in 1925 for the universal church in his encyclical, *Quas Primas*. It is also known as the Feast of Christ the King. Pius was discouraged with the rise of secularism throughout Europe, and associated this indifference to or rejection of religion with increasing denial of Christ as king. Many Christians at the time began to doubt Christ's authority and existence, as well as the Church's power to continue its influence.

Pius witnessed the rise of non-Christian dictatorships in Europe, such as those of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, which attempted to assert authority over the Church. The Feast of Christ the King was thus instituted during a time when respect for Christ and the Church was waning. Pius hoped that the institution of the Feast of Christ the King would give the Church the right to freedom, and immunity from the state; would promote leaders and nations to give respect to Christ, and that the faithful would gain strength and courage from the celebration, as they are reminded that Christ must reign in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies. Christ as king of all.

Where are we today on this spectrum of believing? Where or in whom do we put our trust? There was an ad in today's paper for a casino that said, "Cash is King." In a culture that encourages individualism, the ultimate authority is often the individual self, and the idea of asserting Christ as ruler or King is, for some, difficult to embrace. Additionally, the idea of king may seem to some people antiquated or irrelevant, and the titles "lord" and "king" may evoke images of oppression and oppressive systems and thus some feel they are titles that are problematic, outdated, and need to be rejected.

Our Jeremiah passage read today says: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal

wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." Remember, "righteousness" is another word for "justice" or "virtue."

The Jewish word "messiah" and the Greek word "Christ," both mean "anointed one," and came to refer to the expected king who would deliver Israel from the hands of the Romans. The earliest Christians identified Jesus with this prophesied Messiah. This was not the king most were expecting, however. Jesus came not to free the Jews from the Romans, but to free all people, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, to an honorable, abundant and everlasting life.

How? And why? What is our idea of a king? From what do we need saving today? I think we are tempted to think of our idea of a king like the people in Jeremiah and Luke's time, as someone who will come and save our nation so that we will live in safety and prosperity. Perhaps someone who will not raise our taxes and will allow us freedom to live as we wish, worshiping whom we want to worship, loving whom we want to love, and protecting us from invasion.

Is there a person, a human being, who can do this for us, individually? Can we put our complete trust in a human power? A single, human, governing power?

Jesus came to show us a different kind of Savior, a different kind of King.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus has been crucified. This passage is usually read on Good Friday, but it is offered here today in the lectionary for Christ the King Sunday. What is there to learn about Jesus being a king in today's passage?

Jesus had spent his life teaching about the kingdom of God, preaching good news to the poor and imprisoned, healing the sick and lame, and performing miracles that perplexed those in power and deemed him a threat to the status quo. He had challenged the unjust treatment of women and children, of the poor and the outcast. He was controversial and compelling, so much so that those in control condemned him to death. And not just death, but crucifixion, which was meant not only for death, but for terror, designed by the Romans to produce the greatest amount of lasting pain over a slow, degrading, public death.

Jesus is ridiculed by the leaders who make fun of him as he hangs on the cross, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God!" Jesus is ridiculed by the soldiers who mock him, offering sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Jesus is ridiculed by one of the criminals hanging on the cross next to him, who says, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

It has been noted that these 3 descriptions of taunting Jesus to save himself reflect the 3 challenges of Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Now, Jesus, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Savior, is hanging on the cross and is tempted once again to save himself, to show his power,

his omnipotence, his invincibility; to prove himself. His final opportunity for success and victory.

The criminal on the other side of Jesus breaks in, and says, "Do you not fear God? We are getting what we deserve, but he has done nothing wrong." The criminal recognizes his own internal brokenness and opens himself up to the influence of Christ. This criminal on the cross next to Jesus sees Jesus for who he really is. He recognizes Jesus as Love, and the incredible healing power of that love. There is a gospel song that sings, "He could have called 10,000 angels, to come to his rescue, only love, held him there on the cross."

This criminal hanging on the cross next to Jesus sees that the king's strength lies in his humility, his forgiveness, his vulnerability; that the Savior of the world came not to save himself but to save the rest of us by his example and his sacrifice. Jesus came that we might have faith in a gracious God that offers forgiveness and promises liberation. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," the criminal says humbly and respectfully.

The irony of the sign tacked above the cross, INRI – Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews, is that it was meant to mock Jesus, yet it boldly proclaims the gospel truth. To see "INRI – Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews" above the body of the crucified Jesus in his mother's arms in Michelangelo's sculpture says it all. This is a different kind of king. Jesus Christ the King does not rule over a kingdom of this world, the material world, but of the spiritual world. His rule is not of force, violence or destruction, but of love, peace, justice, forgiveness, mercy, joy and kindness.

This is our king, Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews. Let us proclaim him King of our lives, king of our hearts, minds, bodies and souls; in letting him in, we are called to be our highest selves. This is the irony of the Christian faith. In order to recognize our powerful king, we must witness his suffering, and be in touch with our own hurt, our own vulnerability, our own brokenness. We must be willing to be made whole.

Whatever it is that is hurting you today – a broken relationship, an illness or disease, grief or loss, fear, anger... you can invite Jesus in to heal you and make you whole, by proclaiming him Christ the King, who is able to hear you, relate to your suffering, and welcome you to Paradise.