Text: Luke 23:27-43 (Christ the King)

**Introduction**

The Last Sunday of the Church year is often called Christ the King Sunday. But at least to me that word King has moved from a concrete word that everyone knew what a King was to an abstract word. I’m not a big “royal watcher” but having an interest in liturgical things, the recent death of Queen Elizabeth II was of interest. And someone during that remarked that while it had been 70 years since England had had a king, it would most likely be even longer before another Queen. Charles, William and little George are lined up to be Kings. But that modern English King really isn’t the same word. If you showed even Queen Victoria the rights and responsibilities of Queen Elizabeth II she wouldn’t recognize the throne. Let alone if you go back to that Tyrant George III. (I’m not letting go of the spirit of ‘76.)

And the change is not really about unbound authority. Because even a King in full, like Henry VIII, had the court and parliament and advisors and offices of government. And just as all those things can bind our Presidents be they chaotic or lost in dementia, they could also bind Kings. The change in the word King is about effective authority. If Queen Victoria did not want something, and would make a public pronouncement, that would be it. If King Charles made such a pronouncement, or even the much more beloved Queen Elizabeth, my guess is that the next day the Prime Minister would gather parliament and do just to opposite. And what then is the monarch to do? Is His Majesty’s Navy really his majesty’s? A King in Full has effective authority. What the King says is law and eventually happens.

**Text – Literal**

The important words of the King in our text are said to the thief on the cross. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” The important words are “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

The words of our King are words of grace. This is the work that Christ came to do. To declare peace. To declare pardon. To secure for us a place in the Father’s house. The fancy doctrinal word is the proper work of God – to justify sinners and make them heirs of the Kingdom.

And the Word of God has effective authority. When God spoke, all that is came into being. When God speaks, things happen. This is the Kingly power.

But it is worth pondering for a second the flip side of these Kingly pronouncements.

The thief on the cross is unique to the gospel according to Luke. Matthew and Mark record the two robbers crucified with Jesus, but both of them have both joining in the mockery. “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” That is part of the general mockery. Pilate has written “the King of the Jews” – the charge against Jesus – above him. That is the INRI you see on a crucifix – Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum. Rome did not recognize king’s other than Caesar or his puppets. It was also a bit of mockery. What kind of King ends up on a cross? And that is the mockery that the priests and the pharisees and the rabble that was out to see the executions joined in. And even the thieves on either side. Except Luke records the one’s change of heart. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

It is worth in passing considering what happens when one continues to defy the Word of a King. Treason usually brought death although it could also be exile. But it is a strange kind of exile or death when the words one rejects are grace. “Today you will be with me in paradise.” No, I don’t think so. I’d rather rule in my own realm than accept grace. That’s Milton’s Satan. Dante reminds us that the New Jerusalem has open gates, it is hell that has closed ones. And not to keep people in. When Dante gets to the city of Dis, the Fallen Angels refuse him entry. When Virgil and Dante try to invoke the name of God, they double their efforts to keep the two out. It takes an specially tasked angel to force open the gates. Heaven gets its way.

C.S. Lewis ponders the same thing in a moving way in The Great Divorce. He posits something that isn’t biblically supported, that the grace of God is still available post this life. But what he shows in case after case is that the sins forged in life have become our own definitions. (Kinda like Marley’s Ghost.) And in case after case, being begged by loved ones and might angels, the damned simply can’t imagine repenting of what defines them.

It's the alien work of God. If the proper is to speak pardon, the alien is allow chosen exile. And if we act this way when the wood is green – as it is in this life with its word of grace – how will we act when it is dry?

Christ the King is the King who came to speak pardon.

**Moral**

And the choice set before us by the word of the King is two fold.

First, do we have faith that his word has effective authority? When Jesus says, “Father forgive them” was he heard? When he says “Today you will be with me in paradise”, was he? Will we be?

There are lots of proofs and apologetic arguments. The greatest one for me is simply the resurrection. But they are all variation on the simple question: “Is Jesus who he said he was?” Is he the Son of God through whom all things were made. And just as all things were made at his word, we will be remade at His word. Remade by grace in paradise. We will have a resurrection like his.

The second choice is the same as the thief on the cross. Do we continue to scoff. Do we possibly believe that this one is innocent, but not really fear God and the word of the King. Maybe we believe Jesus is who he says he is. But we don’t believe in that alien work. We think that God will just accept us even if we continue to rebel against his kingly word. That both robbers are in paradise. But that wouldn’t be a king or much of a kingdom if his word meant nothing.

Accepting the grace means admitting that we need it. We don’t have to be on a cross to know that we will die. And that death is a just reward for our sins. That we are all beggars. “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” Those are the words of any heartfelt confession. Repentance is the first act of faith. This one is offering grace, and I a poor miserable sinner need it.

The first fruit born of faith is repentance.

**Eschatological**

There are typically three offices ascribed to Jesus- prophet, priest and king. Even the world is willing to grant Jesus a prophetic role. The world is ready to pronounce him a great moral teacher.

The world doesn’t go this far, but there are lots of people who would be ready to accept Jesus as priest. And the definition of the role of priest is one who make intercession with God. Lots of people are willing to accept that Jesus bridged the divine. Maybe even that he wiped the slate clean by his love. Something like a Buddhist Bodhisattva, one who shows the way. (But not the way himself as Jesus claimed.

But both of those are like the people in one of Jesus’ parables who go “Lord, Lord, we ate and drink in your presence, you taught in our streets.” They are willing to partake of the offering cup. They are willing to listen to the prophetic voice. But their cries of “Lord, Lord” came after the door was shut. It is the Kingly office that typically stands in the way.

Christ is Lord. Our King was crucified. He bids us to pick up our crosses and follow.

It is following the Word of Jesus that is tough.

What does it mean to have a King. It means that His word is effective in our lives. It has authority.

Like Luther says when we pray “thy will be done.” The will of God is certainly done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it would be done among us. Christ is the Eternal King. His word has authority whether we acknowledge it or not. God will have grace or he will carry out the alien act. What we pray is that we recognize Christ the King. That his word has effect on our hearts and lives. That by faith we would see the joys of paradise, if not today, then soon. Amen.