

SERMON: "WHO YOU CALLING A KING?"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT JEREMIAH 23:1-6
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 23:33-43

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Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

I've been in ministry for thirty five years, through lots of elections
Erring on the side of caution, I've never put a political yard sign in my yard
I finally did last year in our local elections, a sign in support of the sheriff
I've worked with him on a few things and was happy to support him

How about you? Did you put any signs in your yard?
You put them there as sign of support, a positive statement
Don't see too many attack ads on yard signs. Thank goodness!
I know I'm not alone in tiring of all the attack ads, so many of them.
My friends in Georgia get two and half more weeks of them. Ugh!

Getting back into the groove of preaching, I could use a sign. 'Give me a sign, Lord'
Sure enough I come back after a sabbatical with a focus on how church
and state are related to just the right Sunday, Christ the King Sunday
and to a New Testament lesson which features an actual sign.

It is not a yard sign, not a sign of support. It is an attack ad, a taunt.

**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."**

The sign that was posted over him was mockery just like the soldiers' taunts about
how he ought to save himself. That's what a king would do, they no doubt thought.
Kings save themselves. They don't die between two common criminals.
Their sign was the rough equivalent of "And you call yourself a king?"

The powers that be, the Romans, kept the people in their place with fear
And with violence. Crucifixion was an intentionally public display
A clear way of saying, "this is what happens if you try to rise" up against us
Tyrants have displayed that brutality for generations ... a deterrent

That is how the world, at its brutal worst, holds onto power

WHAT KIND OF KING

The history of the world and all its great powers is a history of violence
That includes American history. Let's be honest about that
I was reminded of that many times visiting history museums during my sabbatical
The Smithsonian museums on the mall in Washington, DC
The National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis

That is one of the reasons many people in the Church today are pushing back
at what, for many years, we have called Christ the King Sunday
The history of kings and rulers is a violent one. So instead of using that language
to talk about Christ some are calling this Sunday "Reign of Christ" Sunday

I get it. Words and images have power ... but I like the 'king' language
(and not just because Beth and I have been watching 'The Crown')
I like the language of Christ as king because I like the contrast in how he is a king
I especially like the lectionary selection of this passage from the crucifixion
In the past it has been something else, something more other worldly

Here's my question from this passage ... What do you see when you look at the cross?
Let me be more specific, when you look at the crucifix – the cross with Jesus on it
With the soldiers (and leaders) mocking him. With the sign posted over his head
Do you dare see a king in that picture? I pray you do!
I pray you see an intentionally different kind of king

The soldiers and religious leaders (they too are named here)
mocked Jesus, taunted him saying that he could not save himself
They saw his suffering as weakness. But his not saving himself
was not a matter of could he save himself and come down off the cross

It was a question of 'would' not 'could'. He would not.
He knew the cross was his destiny, that his suffering and death
was not a sign a weakness ... it was, and is, and forever will be a sign of strength

That really was a king hanging there on the cross
Not just the king of the Jews, of one people, but a king for all people

That kind of strength, that kind of king, is what we see on the cross
It is what we sing and celebrate on this Sunday in particular
This is the king we serve ... a very different kind of king

The taunts of a dying man from the crowd and with a sign
are put into place by Jesus' words to begin and end this scene
Luke keeps it simple in how he tells the story, rather matter of fact

**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."**

MERCY, NOT MIGHT

While those around him are busy with the work and spectacle of capital punishment
Jesus, quite the contrarian, brings up the subject of forgiveness
'Father, forgive them.' And don't you think that is a really inclusive 'them'
Not just the soldiers 'just doing their job' brutal and ugly as it is
Not just the religious leaders who pushed for their pound of flesh

I like what one commentator said. Jesus' forgiveness was and is
for everyone caught up in that system and every other system like it,
was and is for everyone, for whatever part we play in the brutality of our time

We hear in Jesus' words what kind of king he is, what his rule looks like
Not force ... forgiveness. Not might ... mercy. A different kind of king.

And the mercy Jesus talks about and asks for ... he shows it too
The taunts aren't just from the religious leaders and soldiers
or on the sign. One of the criminals also taunts Jesus.

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 in your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Blessed with the hindsight of history and the faith of our forebears,
we see what that second criminal saw there on the cross next to his
He saw a king, a king on a cross of all places
He saw it, sensed it and in the presence of that king asked for mercy
'Remember me when you come into your kingdom

More than any mocking words, including those on sign
We remember Jesus' words – first with "Father, forgive them" and then
with his reassuring answer to the man who asked that he be remembered
"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

These are such comforting words. Jesus tells him he will be with him paradise!
We hear these words as the promise of resurrection,
We think of heaven ... of heaven soon, real soon, just on the other side

I think of so many people I have loved and lost
And to know they are with him, with Jesus, in paradise
Not only do I hold tight to that truth. I know it holds me. It upholds me.

SUMMARY

That said, the older I get, the more awe and wonder and beauty I have known,
the more pain and loss and worry I have borne,
I recognize I'm becoming more and more stubborn about this
That promise of being with Jesus in paradise, in his kingdom,
isn't just for some unknown tomorrow ... it is for today

Jesus is our king, and he is with us, not just in the paradise of tomorrow
He is our king today. He is with us today
... a today that can be beautiful and/or brutal and/or a mix of both

That fact that Jesus is our king, that our king can be found not just
on the throne in heaven but also on the cross is what gives me hope
And not just hope for tomorrow but for today
as the great hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory" says ...

*Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
for the living of these days, for the living of these days*

That is always the immediate question, isn't it?
How does the good news about Jesus affect the living of these days
What does it mean to acknowledge Christ as king 'for the living of these days'

I really had to fight the temptation with this sermon to tell you in one telling
all about my sabbatical, what I learned through effort and through error,
about how church and state, Christ and culture, fit together.
I'll share what I picked up along the journey bit by bit because
I want us to wrestle together with what it means to have Christ as King

So let the wrestling begin. And let me wrap this sermon up with a quote and a question
A quote from President Johnson, LBJ. Johnson was quoted as saying ...
'I am a free man, an American, a United States Senator,
and a Democrat, in that order.'

Now you may remember that my dad was a Secret Service agent
He was in charge of the protective detail for LBJ's wife, Lady Bird
I wonder if my dad overheard any conversations between them
where she would have reminded LBJ he should have mentioned,
near the top of that ordered list, being a husband and father

If you were to say something similar, after consulting with your family,
what might your list and order look like? And not only that ...
more importantly, what would it look like in your living of these days
As a citizen of this great nation and as a citizen of the kingdom of Christ
What might it look like in the living of these days?