

Crowns

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Luke 23:33-43

33 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. **34** Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. **35** 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!" **36** The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine **37** and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" **38** There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah Save yourself and us!" **40** But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? **41** And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." **42** Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." **43** He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

When I was twenty-two and traipsing through Europe, I queued up for an hour to see the British crown jewels. I stood on a moving walkway that traveled slowly past various wondrous pieces while videos of Queen Elizabeth's coronation played on the wall beyond. The jewels were beautiful, and so was the young queen. I've always thought that in their respective twenties my mother and Queen Elizabeth were near twins, (though no one else in my family sees the resemblance), so I spent the slow passage by the crown jewels imagining my mother on the throne, queen of an empire where the sun never set. And that's what I thought of monarchs for a long time. Keep calm and carry on. Elegance, wealth, power.

Folks in first century Palestine also had notions of royalty.

Jewish folks at that time recalled the kings of old - temple builders, nation builders, and those whom the prophets often criticized for their love of power and wealth. Luke,

writing down Jesus' story after the temple was destroyed in 70, after ancient Israel was brought to its knees multiple times, spoke to an audience in the shadow of former glory.

Everyone in those decades knew Caesar, and Pilate his prefect, and Herod his client king - the occupation and impoverishing of the people.

Many folks hoped Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy, a new earthly ruler who would win a victory militarily and restore the nation of Israel.

And longing for earthly triumph, many wanted to crown Jesus king.

Humans are drawn to glory, wealth, power....

Now, Christ the King made Pilate and his cohort nervous, even fearful because if Jesus was the kind of earthly king they understood, their own power would be diminished. Some of the Jewish authorities did not want to recognize a new king for the same reason - their own power would be diminished.

But that wasn't who Jesus was. Jesus Christ was a very different sovereign. Jesus was a leader of mercy, a servant king, a model of humility. He rode into Jerusalem to cries of acclamation, riding on a donkey, and continued preaching the liberation of the oppressed without sword or throne. Which left a lot of folks confused.

The extraordinary womanist theologian Delores Williams, who died on Friday, named this juxtaposition:

"The "kingship" of Christ can only be understood through this dissonance and harmony: "King of Kings!" on the one hand, as if sung by a resplendent choir; and "poor little Mary's boy" on the other, as if whispered by an elderly woman standing alone. Or again, "Reign of Christ" on the one hand, and God's child, exquisitely vulnerable, on the other....each song needs the other for the truth to shine through."¹

In the text we hear today, we hear the song of poor Mary's little boy, the one who could offer forgiveness and mercy and hope even while hanging on a cross, even to those every earthly ruler condemned. This is the way of God's power - it is the power of love, which can triumph over hate and despair. In Bible study this week one of our folks made a connection: every person who has been mocked, bullied, rejected, tortured - in seeing Jesus on the cross comes to know that mocking and bullying do not have the

¹ Two sources: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/18/power-and-mercy-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-reign-of-christ-the-king-sunday> and <https://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/onscripture/2012/11/a-different-kind-of-king-john-18-33-37.html>

last word. And still he rose And still we rise. This is the basileia of God, not when gold and silver shine, but when justice and hope emerge from despair.

Yet there is a tension in all of the Gospels between expectations for Jesus' earthly triumph and kingship and hopes for the inbreaking of the reign of the Divine. Tension between glory manifest, and humble compassion. We have repeated that tension all of Christian history, both building cathedrals and feeding the poor.

On that same trip to Europe I stood in holy places where extraordinary beauty brought glory to God and moved me to bow. We joyfully and passionately sing hymns of Christ's glory. The original symbol of the United Church of Christ includes a crown for Christ. And it should not be any other way. The church's work of worship and beauty and the church's work of mercy and justice are both important.

But on the other hand, we have all seen earthly figures claim the right to wear Christ's crown, monarchs and elected officials claiming power by proclaiming Christ the King for the purpose of building up human empire. History tells of domination and destruction and unspeakable injustice done in Christ's name, we confess it, we repent from it.

And it's not just famous folks, and it's not just ancient history. We spend a lot of time building up our own kingdom: anytime we practice power-over, we're grabbing at a false crown. Anytime we prioritize money, pleasure, a building, our own self-interest over that of our neighbors, we're aiming at empire, not the kingdom of God.

Jesus was not building an empire, he was building a kin-dom. We who bow before this throne do not mean to build an empire but a realm of kindness, justice, servanthood, mercy.²

We bow before a manger, not a throne.

We pay homage not in the form of jewels but in the form of generosity to our neighbors.

This matters because we live in a world with a lot of monarchs and politicians, celebrities and power brokers, and all kinds of idols of power and glory, vying for our loyalty. When our primary loyalty is to Christ, over any human sovereign or institution, it defines our orientation. We worship one who offered mercy, so we offer mercy. We worship one who sought justice so we are justice seekers. We worship one who set a table for all, so we set the welcome table. When it comes down to it, we will give up our

²<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/18/power-and-mercy-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-reign-of-christ-the-king-sunday>

own human power, our own sovereignty, our own individualism, our own wealth, our own territory - to be subjects of Christ's kingdom.

We give homage to a king crowned with thorns, executed by the state, who looks with compassion upon the lowliest people (that must mean us, too), and proclaims God's own liberation. We listen to him saying, God's realm is like *this* - and we step forward to be builders of the kingdom of God. We follow this one as he rises above every earthly kingdom - and that's the point - that's the good news - because it is by being loyal to this sovereign and this basileia of God that we too shall rise.

The crucified man next to Jesus asked, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus, on the cross, made a promise that they would be together in paradise. But that does not mean Jesus' kingdom is separate from this world. It is already and not yet. It is right here and it must be right now. We speak of building up the kin-dom of God, here in this world. And this is how it happens: every time people of this world become citizens of Christ's kingdom, we bring the meeting point of heaven and heart a little bit closer together.

And so we pray, Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom.

And so, we pray,

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen.