

The Cardboard King
Luke 23:33-43
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I am sure I won't be the only preacher this week making use of the recently announced engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton to say something about kingship, monarchy, etc. The timing couldn't have played out better coming just days before Christ the King Sunday, and its reflections on the role of Christ as ruler of all creation, or at least of the Jews, according to the sign placed over his head during his execution. Only some of us in this room have a tradition of monarchy as part of our heritage, and so the challenge of Christ the King Sunday always includes taking a relatively foreign concept and speaking to it in a helpful way. In fact, the British monarchy is not really the most helpful modern-day example to acquaint ourselves with what the idea of Kingship implies. It is Saudi Arabia which may be a better modern monarchy to consider than Great Britain, since the latter is a Constitutional monarchy under which the royalty have no real power in the day-to-day affairs of the state. In Saudi Arabia, where the king is the absolute monarch of his country, the citizenry is required, to quote the constitution of that country, "to pay allegiance to the King in accordance with the holy Koran and the tradition of the Prophet, in submission and obedience, in times of ease and difficulty, fortune and adversity." That is a far cry from the typical approach the United Kingdom takes to Queen Elizabeth, Prince Charles, and their lot, and much

closer to what Caesar meant to the citizens of the Roman Empire, under which Jesus and those who followed him were subject.

There are a great number of awful attributes that have been fairly attributed to kings over the years. Capricious, egomaniacal, ruthless, and even bumbling would be some of them, ones of course we would not even think of celebrating, much less assigning to Christ the King. There have been some good kings over the years, and I suppose that if I had to use one of the more charitable characteristics of kingship to define the whole idea, I guess I would choose the related attributes of loyalty and obedience, or more specifically, demanding loyalty, and requiring obedience. Though these too can be misused, having the loyalty and obedience of your subjects can go a long way in making your reign one that is positively remembered. And of course, through the centuries, Christians have extolled the virtue of being obedient to Christ, who himself was obedient unto death. Obey the Ten Commandments, obey the Commandment to love God and love neighbor, show your loyalty even if it leads to martyrdom – these are some of the ways that loyalty and obedience to Christ the King have been expressed.

It is clear that Christ valued obedience; the command, or invitation, “Follow me,” for example, can hardly be imagined without Christ’s expectation that they would do so. Nevertheless, there are other values which more fully define his kingship. Indeed, the visual image from tonight’s Gospel reading portrays it better than any words; Jesus Christ, the antithesis of earthly kingship, hanging on a piece

of wood alongside two common criminals. Perhaps the Roman Catholics are on to something by portraying Christ crucified, as powerful a reminder as it is of the true nature of the rule and reign Christ has over our lives. It is hard to imagine King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia or Queen Elizabeth taking one for the team, or leading by example in laying down his life for one of his subjects. More likely their subjects would be called upon to sacrifice for them, although I do understand the royal family's multimillion dollar annual subsidy is being reduced by a few million during these hard economic times. It is, indeed, Jesus' crucifixion that differentiates his kingship from that of other pretenders to the throne. You see, rather than demand obedience from others, Jesus exercises it. He is obedient to God, to the end, and the world is changed. If you can't take that on faith, that Jesus, by his obedience, rocks the world, just ask one of those the criminals.

There are many images in tonight's passage that can reach out and grab you. The one that grabbed me for tonight is the sign over Jesus' head, the one which proclaimed both the ignorance of those who crucified Jesus, and the ironic truth about him at the same time. They crucified him out of fear that he was the king all his compatriots wanted him to be, and yet, he died exactly because he wasn't. Instead, he was exactly what God wanted him to be, someone who used his power to transform not his own situation, but the lot of those around him, both to his right and his left, beneath his bleeding feet, and throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In the most delicious irony, they so completely

misunderstood and overestimated his earthly power that they did the very thing which would demonstrate the fullness of his power not only to one of the thieves hanging there with him, but to the Centurion who later said, “Truly this man was innocent,” and to all who in every age have every gazed upon the broken body of the man with the sign, “This is the King of the Jews,” hanging over his head, and recognized him as King of all creation, but more importantly King of their lives.

You have probably noticed the signs hanging from the cross behind me, and although they didn't have cardboard in Jesus' day, I am sure that if they had, that is exactly what they would have used, a throwaway material for a disposable man. Perhaps these signs remind you of those that homeless people use at street corners and in front of stores to tell their story and/or seek your generosity. Even those signs which simply ask for a handout are really a story in themselves, a story of how the person holding them arrived where they are in the condition they are in. There may not be much detail, but there is enough to reveal the hopelessness and despair and neglect that are a daily fact of life. Our story tonight in Luke doesn't tell us that signs also hung over the heads of the two criminals crucified with Jesus, but we can make an educated guess. How about “Sentenced to Death” and “Convicted of Unpardonable Crimes”? Does that sound about right? And knowing that this is their status, they both have something to say to Jesus, one adding his taunts to those coming from the ground, from the soldiers and the leaders, who mocked Jesus and the title Messiah, and the other who reaffirmed what we all

know, that Jesus was innocent, and who appealed to Jesus that he might be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom. Jesus does not respond to the first, but he delivers a simple statement to the other that reaffirms that he is indeed the King of the Jews, and everyone else, when he says, “Truly, I tell, you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

As I reflected on the sign that hung over Jesus’ head, I was reminded of a testimony I had seen about how lives, like that of the criminal who appealed to Jesus, how lives are transformed by the love and grace of Jesus Christ. As you will see in a moment, the witness of this testimony is that there are always two sides to the cardboard sign each of us holds, the one that tells our story. The front side tells the before, and the other side the after, and the one who does the turning is the same God who took the sign over the head of Jesus Christ on the cross, and turned it around. What do you think it said on the other side of Jesus sign? Well, let’s take a look. (Turn over sign to reveal: “Seated at the right hand of God”). And what do you suppose was on the other side of the mocking thief? (Turn over sign to reveal: “Dead, buried, and forgotten”) And on the back of the other one? (Turn over to reveal: “With Jesus Today in Paradise”).

You may not be wearing it tonight, but each one of us has a sign, with writing on the front, and hopefully, writing on the back, a testimony of how our lives have been transformed by Christ the King. As you think about what the sides of your sign might read, let me invite you to watch how members of another

church shared their signs, and gave depth to the Paradise into which they too entered. (Show [video](#) of Cardboard Testimonies)

I want to leave you tonight with these final two quick thoughts. The first is this: that if you are drawing a blank at what you would write on your piece of cardboard, I would invite you to spend some time looking at a crucifix this week, reflecting on how the King we call Christ is a king who has indeed transformed your life. If, after that reflection, the two sides of your sign still haven't come to you, please give me a call and let's sit down and see if we can't discover it together.

The other thought is this: that it is not only the people at street corners who hold up their signs to us as we drive by that have something written on only one side. It is certainly not to judge anyone's story to observe that the other side is blank, but it is hard to imagine they have experienced the invitation to paradise that the criminal in tonight's story received. Christ the King transforms lives, but he also calls upon us to be part of that transformation in the lives of those who have yet to hear or believe or experience the call to paradise. May it be our hearts, our hands, and our voices that help others to be able to write the rest of their story on the other side of their sign, no matter what the front may say, just as God did for Jesus Christ, and as Christ has done for us. Amen.