

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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Christ the King, Year C

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This week it was hard for me to write a sermon. Not because I didn't find anything in this week's readings, but because I found so many things and love them all and want to talk about all of them and sermons are not supposed to be five hours long. I *love* Christ the King Sunday. It's our yearly reminder that as Christians, our ultimate allegiance is to God, in Christ- to God Incarnate, to a Jewish man from Nazareth who pointed the way to the Reign of God and flipped upside down the narrative on kingly power. *And*, I *love* this passage from Luke, especially the interchange between Jesus and an unnamed criminal at the end, so I have trouble not gushing. At one point I had eleven pages of notes.

On my way to work on Thursday, however, an idea popped into my head which distilled the gushing and focused my out-of-control enthusiasm into a manageable idea: I think encountering Jesus, *really* encountering him, breaks open the everyday world and shows us God's kingdom, and we cannot help but be changed by it.

The gospels are a series of stories about people who meet God in Jesus of Nazareth and are transformed: the disciples, who leave their lives to follow the Way; Zaccheus, climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of God; the unnamed people healed of their infirmities, made whole and hopeful. They experience the kingdom up close, in God Incarnate, and cannot go back to their past lives. Their allegiance has shifted. They meet Jesus, whose name means *God saves*, Emmanuel, whose name means *God with us*, and the world breaks open. It breaks open in the sense that they see the gap between what *is* and what God dreams for us, and they choose the better road. And they do not choose it quietly. The people Jesus calls, the people Jesus heals, can't help but share the Good News. They proclaim, they evangelize, simply because they've come near

God's love and mercy, and it gushes forth from them like a well. They *have* to share it. They are transformed.

Jesus encountered people of all sorts, but the ones that stand out to me the most are the ones for whom life had become unbearable, because it is there that the change is most dramatic. The demoniac chained among the tombs; Jesus heals him and he is ready to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. The woman bent over with pain for *years*, who had only to touch the hem of Jesus' cloak to be healed. The lepers who couldn't come near their families or friends, who are healed in body but cleansed, restored to their communities, and also this man hanging on the cross, who sees nothing but a painful death before him and puts his trust, his faith, in the only thing that doesn't perish.

This is what catches me every time I hear this passage- a criminal hanging on a cross, in real agony, sees in Jesus the only thing that lasts, the only hope beyond the pain of right now. *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* He looks at Jesus and doesn't only see a man condemned by Rome; he sees mercy. He sees the divine. He experiences repentance, forgiveness, and grace in what should be a God-forsaken place. *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.* This man's world is broken open and transformed, just like the others who encounter Jesus. His life is made better and richer, even if it cannot be made longer. I can't imagine what it feels like to die such a death, but I can imagine the immense relief in knowing, *really* knowing, that I am not alone, and that God's love doesn't end at the grave. Money ends; earthly kingdoms end; power and prestige end; but God's kingdom does not end. God's kingdom endures, even past the point of death.

Isn't it amazing that *this* is our gospel text on Christ the King Sunday? Christ the King Sunday is the final day of the church year, the day set aside to celebrate the reign of Jesus. Jesus' kingship is absolutely apparent in the gospel, just in an unexpected way. The Kingdom of God is the only thing that lasts, and the cross reminds us all that Jesus reigns over all of it, even the awful parts. He is with us in our pain, with us in the

hardest parts of our lives. Like the image on the cover of our bulletin, the gospel situates the Kingship of Jesus in the crucifixion. This special cross, called the Christus Rex- Christ the King- is one of the oldest representations of Jesus. The tension is beautiful- it doesn't negate the pain of the cross; instead, it hallows it, sanctifies it, and marks the cross as a sort of throne for the true King. Jesus' kingship means that the worst thing is never the last thing, that mercy and forgiveness are always possible, that God is always present.

We encounter Jesus differently today. Jesus is not *here*, fleshly, walking around healing and forgiving and calling us to follow. In a real sense, Jesus is *everywhere*, in less recognizable but just as life-altering ways. We have the opportunity to meet Jesus in the faces of everyone we encounter, but especially in the poor, the hungry, the lonely, the stranger. We encounter him in the weekly celebration of Bread and Wine right here at this altar, his Body and Blood shed for us, a reminder that God's love is so vast and so merciful that God became human, and lived a life of sacrifice, showing us what it means to live fully for God, even when it means dying for God. We encounter him through prayer, and through living a life built on love of God and love of neighbor. All of these encounters make space in our hearts for more love, more mercy, more forgiveness. All of these encounters can remind us of where our allegiance lies, if we're willing to pay attention.

We also encounter Jesus in those moments when life no longer holds together as it should, in the suffering we experience, when our lives fall apart. When life as it is no longer works, when I feel a little bit broken by the world, God is still there, in the cracks, just as God has always been there. When we are chained in the metaphorical hinterland, when we are doubled over in pain or grief or anger, when we are isolated from family and friends, Jesus is there too, offering healing and love and mercy, inviting us to live the Kingdom Life. When we encounter Christ, glimpse that kingdom, our vision shifts and we know, really know, that God is with us, fully with us.

There is nothing that separates us from God's love- not sin, not even death. God is there with us in our worst, most horrible moments, not promising to make them go away but promising that the worst part is never the last part. The Reign of Christ in the here-and-now doesn't mean we don't suffer, or experience loss. It doesn't mean we don't sin. Instead it means that all of it, *all of it*, is redeemed by the King who accompanies us in our pain just as he preceded us through death to the Father's Kingdom. It's a promise that God is with us in the imperfect now, and that God's perfect kingdom will come. The true king, Emmanuel, stretches out his arms in love even on the cross and invites us into the kingdom that lasts. Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.