

Christ the King C (11/20/2016)  
Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Psalm 46  
Colossians 1:11-20  
**Luke 23:33-43**

*“Crucified King” is a contradiction in terms. We expect kings to exercise violent power, to crucify – not become victims of violent power, to suffer crucifixion. Throughout the ages, kings have gotten blood on their hands. But, the only blood on the Crucified King’s hands is his own, and by enduring the cross – by refusing to deal in the ways of kings – he becomes the only king who can guide us into the way of peace.*

The New York Times woefully underestimated the threat of Adolf Hitler’s anti-Semitism. In a 1922 article, the first the newspaper ever published about Germany’s rising political star, the author downplayed Hitler’s anti-Jewish rhetoric as nothing more than a campaign strategy:

... several reliable, well-informed sources confirmed the idea that Hitler's anti-Semitism was not so genuine or violent as it sounded, and that he was merely using anti-Semitic propaganda as a bait to catch masses of followers and keep them aroused, enthusiastic, and in line for the time when his organization is perfected and sufficiently powerful to be employed effectively for political purposes.

A sophisticated politician credited Hitler with peculiar political cleverness for laying emphasis and over-emphasis on anti-Semitism, saying: "You can't expect the masses to understand or appreciate your finer real aims. You must feed the masses with cruder morsels and ideas like anti-Semitism. It would be politically all wrong to tell them the truth about where you really are leading them."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this assessment was tragically mistaken. Hitler made good on his anti-Semitism by registering, rounding up, and finally massacring six million European Jews in the decades immediately following the publication of the Times article. The king had blood on his hands. “And the people stood by, watching.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.snopes.com/1922-new-york-times-hitler/>.

It may seem odd to celebrate the festival of Christ the King by remembering his cross. After all, on the surface, the crucifixion appeared the least regal moment of Jesus' life. His executioners heaped humiliation on top of his suffering by jeering him with false accolades: "...let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God," "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" *This is no king*, they decided. **Kings do not hang pitifully from devices of torture and execution, devices of state-sanctioned terrorism. No, real kings subject other people to their will, by brutal force if necessary; real kings have blood on their hands.** "And the people stood by, watching."

We, too, may reject a king who in the height of conflict neither defends himself nor denounces his enemies. We may recoil at the image of a king who does not seek to conquer, but who is conquered. So, we may prefer to celebrate the festival of Christ the King instead by recalling Jesus' acts of power, or his timeless wisdom, or his enthronement "at the right hand of the Father."<sup>2</sup> Those are characteristics worthy of a king!

"Crucified King," on the other hand, is a contradiction in terms. We expect a king to rule by might, to crucify – not become a victim of the mighty, to suffer crucifixion. But our confession today is precisely that: **The true king is crucified, standing in for all who suffer unjustly at the hands of established Power.**<sup>3</sup>

The festival of Christ the King itself originated in defiance of such Powers. Christ the King Sunday didn't find its way onto the liturgical calendar until 1925, less than a century ago, when Pope Pius XI established the festival in response to the

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<sup>2</sup> Apostles' Creed.

<sup>3</sup> See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/christ-the-king-c-what-kind-of-king-do-you-want/>.

rise of authoritarian nationalist regimes across Europe. In his encyclical, *Quas primas*, Pius decreed: “Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence or usurped, but his by essence and by nature.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, *Christ is king, not Mussolini. Christ is king, not Hitler. **Christ is king, not any earthly ruler who promises peace and prosperity through domination or suppression.***

**As we read our history, it’s clear that earthly kings have gotten blood on their hands. It’s what crowned them kings in the first place, and kept them on their thrones.** All the while, vulnerable people, despised people have been marked, dehumanized, and led away to their own crosses. And too often, as in Nazi Germany and elsewhere, the people have stood by, watching.

**But the only blood on the Crucified King’s hands is his own. As far removed as the cross seems from any recognizable throne, Christ is crowned king in the very moment that he renounces violent power and hangs closest to the crucified of this world.** Notice that only the dying thief, the lowest and most reviled among those at the scene, recognizes Jesus’ royal identity for what it really is. The people who exercise power at Golgotha mock Jesus with sardonic titles, but only the dying thief gets a glimpse of the truth: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And, in spite of his executioners’ proud assumptions, Jesus’ refusal to save himself does not render him incapable of saving others<sup>5</sup>: “Truly I tell you,” he promises the helpless man at his side, “today you will be with me in paradise.”

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ\\_the\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_the_King).

<sup>5</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 818.

That's the nature of the Crucified King. He makes an offer of salvation not from death but in and even through death.<sup>6</sup> **Earthly kings lead by fear and demonstrations of supremacy, but the Crucified King leads by forgiveness and the promise of abundant life, even for those who strip him of his dignity and wrench his life away.**

Dear church, which king will we trust? Are we satisfied to stand by, watching, when earthly kings make victims of the most vulnerable among us? Or, **can we trust Christ the King to endure the cross for our sake, and by refusing to deal in the way of kings, to become the only king who can guide us into the way of peace?**<sup>7</sup>

On this festival of Christ the King, to adapt the words of Pope Pius, its founder, may Christ **"reign in our minds,"** and lead us into true wisdom; may Christ **"reign in our wills,"** and lead us into obedience to his command, may Christ **"reign in our hearts,"** and lead us into cross-shaped love, and may Christ **"reign in our bodies,"** and make us **"instruments of justice unto God."**<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 822.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:79.

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast\\_of\\_Christ\\_the\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_Christ_the_King).