

[Luke 23:33-43](#)

It has become fashionable to refer to this Last Sunday Before Advent as the Feast Of Christ The King. But once of my minister friends said recently he wasn't going to call today the Feast Of Christ The King, because that was only invented by the Pope in 1925.

My friend is right, but I disagree with him.

He is right that Pope Pius XI came up with that name, but just because a Catholic Pope invented the feast doesn't mean it's wrong.

I mean, what's the alternative? When we just call today the Last Sunday Before Advent it's as if everything is just petering out so that we can start winding up through Advent again, getting excited for Christmas.

But does the Christian Year really fizzle out like that? The Christian story doesn't. It comes to a climax with the kingdom of God coming in all its fulness and God putting everything right at the Last Judgement. It comes with everything, even death, being conquered by Christ and placed under his feet. It is the time when everything will have been made new. Pain, tears, and suffering will be abolished. I want to celebrate that before we begin to retell the Christian story at Advent.

So I'm sticking with the Feast Of Christ The King. It's a wonderful day. I was even twenty-four hours later than I intended emailing the order of service through this week because I was so spoilt for choice of hymns and songs, there are so many that celebrate Jesus as King.

But here's the surprise. If we take a final episode from Luke's Gospel to explore this wonderful theme, then we end up in an unexpected location. For although we read throughout Luke of Jesus inaugurating the kingdom of God, the place where Luke shows Jesus being addressed as King is in the reading we heard. He is proclaimed King at the Cross. Of all the places.

So how does Jesus act as King at the Cross? In this strange location he also exercises kingship in startling ways.

Firstly, *Jesus forgives his enemies.*

If you've been to any of the weddings I've conducted you may have heard me tell the story about the newlyweds who had all their photos taken outside the front of the church after the ceremony. The photographer got all the usual

groups together there: groom with best man, bride with bridesmaids, happy couple with his family, with her family, with friends, and so on. What the photographer didn't notice is that behind the couple in every photo was the church noticeboard, which served as a wayside pulpit. So immediately behind the bride and groom was a Bible verse: 'Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.'

³⁴ Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

A king may pardon criminals. But that is usually after they have been convicted and with a sense that yes, these people have indeed done wrong. But Jesus is surrounded by people who are wilfully taunting him and inflicting pain on him. These are the people he asks his Father to forgive. People who think that the wicked things they are doing are actually right.

They don't know what they're doing? They're acting with their own free will and are therefore answerable for their actions, but this passage is stuffed with allusions to Old Testament psalms and prophecies, indicating that God was working out his eternal purposes at the Cross. So yes, they were morally responsible, but God was using even their sinful actions to accomplish his will.

So here is a kingdom that is based on justice, yes, but not on revenge.

And how glad we should be that his kingdom is like this. We have all acted as enemies of God in our lives. We have all put Jesus on the Cross by our actions, even without realising it. If God's only option were vengeance, we would have been fried by now.

But at the Cross, Jesus says, whatever you have done to me, I offer you forgiveness. Will you respond by leaving behind the ways by which you have crucified me and live instead under my kingdom?

The invitation is there. How do we respond?

Secondly, *Jesus suffers.*

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

But Luke writes this against a backdrop of rulers and soldiers sneering at his apparent inability to save himself (verses 35-37). The supposed Messiah, the

true King of Israel, is suffering. This invalidates his claim in their eyes. And so they mock.

That way of thinking hasn't gone away. It's still present in the world. As I've said before, Islam believes Jesus couldn't have died on the Cross, because no prophet of God should end up suffering and dying unjustly. To which Christians say – they shouldn't, but they do. However, God will put things right in the Resurrection.

It's a contrast to what we marked a week ago with Remembrance Sunday. We remembered great and terrible suffering then, but of a different kind. People risked suffering for the sake of freedom. But it wasn't that their suffering brought freedom. The surrender of the Nazis and of Japan happened when they could no longer endure the suffering and defeats inflicted upon them.

But in the case of Jesus at the Cross he suffers not in defeat but in victory. His suffering for the sin of the world is what brings freedom to those who will embrace him.

Once again, Jesus turns our expectations of kingship upside-down. Unlike Roman emperors condemning gladiators to death in the Colosseum, he takes on death, feels all its force, and protects others from its consequences. He is like the bumper of the car taking the force of the collision and protecting the driver and passengers.

And he is victorious. For he removes the sting of death, and serves notice on it in the Resurrection.

Jesus is the King in the model of the Old Testament: slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And he shows that truth about God not only in the way he lives but in his death on the Cross.

Others mocked that title 'King of the Jews' at Golgotha but Jesus was showing his true kingship in the most radical way possible – the King of Love is the King of Suffering Love, suffering for his people.

Thirdly and finally, *Jesus restores*.

We come to the account of the two criminals executed with Jesus. One joins with the mockers:

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him:
'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

But the other, knowing that they have been justly convicted for their crimes unlike the innocent Jesus (verses 40-41) , makes his famous heart-rending plea:

⁴² Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

⁴³ Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

'Remember me.' This sense of being forgotten and rejected by society – understandably! But has he heard of how merciful Jesus is to sinners? Has he heard the stories of Jesus sharing meal tables with the socially disreputable?

And guess what? Even in the middle of his agony as he hangs there, Jesus' heart still beats for the excluded. He responds with grace to the cry for mercy.

And he does so with a change of his usual language. Normally when Jesus talks about death he uses the image of 'being asleep.' Not here. 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' Why?

Ian Paul, whom I often quote, [puts it like this](#):

The language of 'paradise' would have made sense to a non-Jewish audience, but it was also used by Jews to refer either to an intermediate state in the presence of God as well as to our final destiny in a renewed heaven and earth. It is worth noting that the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, LXX) constantly translated the Hebrew for 'garden' with 'paradise', so that God planted a 'paradise' in Eden for the first human in [Gen 2.8](#). For anyone aware of this, Jesus' promise to the thief is of the restoration of all things.

The criminal will be in a place of restoration. His salvation means that he, like creation, will be restored to all that he was meant to be. All things are being made new, and that includes him. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians, 'If anyone is in Christ, new creation!' Jesus isn't about locking up the criminal and throwing away the key. He truly remembers him and makes him new. He makes him all he was ever meant to be.

He has the same project for us, too.

Conclusion

So as King Jesus forgives his enemies, suffers out of love, and restores the forgotten. All this will reach its climax at the end of history as we know it.

How then do we live now in the light of that? If we return to Pope Pius XI and listen to why he made this Sunday the Feast Of Christ The King we shall know the answer. [Pius said](#):

If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.