

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY  
“CHRIST OUR KING”  
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Luke 23:33-43  
ALL SERVICES**

The world associates power with authority and force. But who exercises true power in the world? Not the proud tyrants who have crushed the strong and destroyed millions of lives, but the servant leaders who have empowered the weak and opened a new future for all.

Historically, kings and queens exercise power over all those beneath them. Sometimes their use of force is necessary to uphold the rule of law. Jesus' kingship is different. He carries the burdens of our humanity himself. His law is love. Jesus gives a new meaning to kingship.

Jesus' enemies made a mockery of his *“kingship.”* His crown was made of thorns and his throne was a cross. Little did they realize that he was indeed a king, the King of kings who call people into the eternal kingdom of God.

What kind of king was Jesus? He was not king of the Jews. Many of them called for his death. He was not the Messiah of popular expectation. He was not a king to oppose the Roman occupying forces. So, what kind of king was Jesus? Or was he a king at all?

Last words, famous or not, are fascinating. They are thought to provide unique insight into the dying person. This may or may not be true. The notorious Pancho Villa's last words were: **“Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something.”** Henry Ward Beecher's last words were: **“You were saying that I could not recover.”** Lady Nancy Astor's last words were uttered when she awoke and saw her family gathered around her bed. She said: **“Am I dying or is this my birthday?”** Oscar Wilde's last words were: **“Either this wallpaper goes or I do.”** Each of these is somehow fitting. Have you ever considered what Jesus' last words said about him?

The “**seven last words**” of Jesus from the cross have been immortalized in countless musical compositions. They are among the most widely used biblical texts in devotional, sermonic, and meditative settings. Three of the “**sayings**” are from Luke, three are from John, and one is found in both Matthew and Mark. The first two are found in our gospel lesson for today. **Luke 23:34** – “*Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.*” **Luke 23:43** – “*I assure you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.*” These two “**sayings**” express Jesus’ love for his enemies, those who crucified him and at least one who died with him.

The story of Jesus’ life, as told in the Gospels, contains a great number of anonymous individuals whom we would like to know more about. Most of them make only brief appearances, which makes us even more curious about them. Two of these are the men who were crucified with Jesus. They appear in all four Gospels, but are most prominent in Luke’s Gospel. Matthew and Mark refer to the two men as “**robbers,**” while John says only that Jesus was crucified “**with two others.**” Luke tells us they were “**criminals.**” Whoever these men were, they died on either side of Jesus. There were three crosses on Golgotha that day.

Crucifixion appears to have originated with the Persians, and later was passed on to the Greeks and Romans. A principal function of the cross was to display the guilty person for all to see. This was thought to have significant deterrent value. Very much the reason we have capital punishment today. The suffering was torturous and death came slowly. The body was often left on the cross for a while after death to further stress the consequences of breaking the law. The Romans considered crucifixion the supreme penalty and the most wretched of deaths. The two who were crucified with Jesus may have been guilty of a political crime. Rome was deadly serious about squelching all forms of rebellion, and the people hated living under the rule of a foreign government. This made them susceptible to anyone making messianic claims.

There is a significant moment involving the two who were dying with Jesus that is recorded only in Luke. Mark simply says that those who were crucified with Jesus reviled him. Luke says that one of the two men perceived who Jesus was. He rebuked his fellow criminal on the basis that the hour of death is hardly the time for a sinner to revile an innocent man. Then the penitent criminal turns to Jesus with a plea to be remembered when Jesus comes in his kingly power. He is asking to be remembered in the future *parousia*, when the Messiah comes in power. Jesus assures the man that he will not have to wait for such a future moment. “**Today,**” Jesus says, “***you will be with me in Paradise.***”

**“Paradise”** is a word of Persian origin meaning heaven. In this exchange death is presented in a new light. What is obvious is that these two must die in order to be in Paradise. Therefore, death is not a defeat. It is rather a necessary experience if one is to enter into glory. Death is interpreted as entrance into God’s presence, both for Jesus and for those who trust in him.

Consider, then, what is revealed in Jesus’ last words from the cross. The first three are expressions of love for others. Jesus prays that God will forgive his executioners. Then he graciously assures the penitent criminal a place with him in heaven. Third, he expresses love and concern for his mother and for John. All three represent a compassionate concern for other people, even as Jesus is undergoing the most agonizing moment of his life. The next three sayings of Jesus reveal something of the human dimension of his suffering. He feels forsaken. He is dehydrated and wanting water. And, as the end approaches, he is relieved. The final saying is a surrendering of his whole being into the hands of God.

On this Christ the King Sunday, what kind of king is Jesus? Today there are still disputes about this. Some prefer a militant Jesus who is bent on destroying the **“enemies”** of God. Some favor a pop culture Jesus who is into everything contemporary. Others only accept the traditional Jesus of **“old time religion.”** Still others follow a Jesus of esoteric mysteries and paranormal phenomena. Ultimately, however, for all who seek to know and to follow Jesus, his is the kingdom of love. In 1868, Henry Baker wrote a poem based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It declares in a clear and poignant manner what kind of king Jesus is. **“The King of love my Shepherd is, / Whose goodness faileth never; / I nothing lack if I am His / And He is mine forever”.**

Commandments represent impersonal ways of protecting and influencing people. They are often seen as harsh and burdensome. Biblical faith calls us to a life of sacrificial love. Jesus’ **“new”** commandment was actually the old commandment to love. Those who truly and sacrificially love will know the presence of God. Those who love belong to God and know God because God is love.

I invite you on the Commitment Sunday into a new kingdom; the kingdom of Christ. It is a kingdom that knows no racial or political boundaries, no class or gender differences. We qualify for citizenship in this kingdom not by virtue of our achievements but by virtue of what Christ has achieved for us. If you are willing to become an inductee in this kingdom, I would love to be your pastor. I would

love for this to be your church. Let us make our witness for the coming year with our stewardship commitment now. Let us step out and step up.