

**SERMON – 23/11/25**  
**'Christ the King'**

Luke 23:33-43

"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'" (Luke 23:39-41)

Today is the last Sunday before Advent, the final Sunday of the ecclesiastical calendar, known as the Feast of Christ the King when our focus is on the culmination of all things, the establishment of the Kingdom of God when in the words of Paul to the Corinthians Christ will have "destroyed all dominion, authority and power" and have "put all his enemies under his feet," the last enemy to be destroyed being death. (1 Cor.15:24-26)

We began our service this morning with the triumphant words of Psalm 24 about the King of glory coming in but while our Gospel reading takes us to the enthronement of Jesus we are taken not to a scene of splendour and majesty in human terms but to Calvary and it is there that I would like us to go in our reflections today.

In what may be a slightly different style of sermon this morning, I would like you each consciously to create in your imagination a picture of the scene we read about from Luke 23. Close your eyes if you like. You have probably heard the story of Jesus' death read many times and I'm sure you will have seen many images of the scene in many different styles. Of course no-one knows exactly how it looked on that momentous day just short of 2000 years ago, so the details of what you visualise don't actually matter too much. But I want you to imagine the scene in such a way as is meaningful to you because I want you to be able to place *yourself* in the scene. Take a moment then just to imagine what is happening. (As I say, close your eyes if you want to).

You are there in the crowd, maybe one of Jesus' followers keeping your distance in case you are recognised, maybe

someone with a job to do on the day, perhaps just a passer by, perhaps someone who has been involved in orchestrating Jesus' arrest and trial and conviction and the passing of the death sentence.

"When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified Jesus along with two criminals one on His right and the other on His left." (v.33) What do you see? Is your curiosity satisfied? Or can you even bear to look?

Here in this scene the heart of the Gospel is to be found, the message and the significance of why Jesus came into the world. Take in the scene today, will you. Three men lifted high on three crosses, the mechanics of the justice system of the day being worked out in brutal violence. All three will be dead before nightfall.

Let me invite you to reflect on these three men in turn as they represent three very different ways to live, three very different ways that each of us can choose to live our lives today.

The first way is the way of the world that has actually brought us to this point in the story – it is lived out in the actions of many who are there that day and taken to its culmination in the words and actions of the first criminal.

We see here the outworking of flawed human justice, the jealousy and politics of the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities who brought these three men to be executed that day, two of them because they had been found guilty of capital offences and one of them, Jesus, because His face didn't fit and He had to be got rid of. We see here the very human self-interest of the soldiers who divided up the clothes of those being executed, the crowds none of whom were prepared to speak up for an innocent man being sent to His death unjustly, the rulers who rubbed their hands with glee at having got one over on Jesus for nearly toppling them from their positions of power. We see here the kind of reaction you get to this day when someone in the public eye is brought low – sneering, mocking, caricaturing, teasing – while today it might be headlines in the tabloids or vitriolic posts on social media, that day it was vocal baying (perhaps you can hear it in your imagination). That day, a sign was posted on Jesus' Cross,

saying 'This is the King of the Jews' – it was supposed to be the last laugh, while in fact it was the truth which nothing can finally overcome, and was testimony to their complete lack of understanding.

My friends, *this* is the way of the world and it is summarised in the words of the bitterly sceptical prayer of the first criminal: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Down through the ages the world has yelled such words at the crucified Christ and we hear the same mocking accusations again and again from our oh-so-enlightened contemporary society. Here is the way of the world. Do you see it in the background of the image in your minds eye and hear it in the words addressed to Jesus by the first man by His side? Take it in.

For in very sharp contrast we see Jesus lifted up and we see the way of grace and of Gospel as we hear His simple but transforming words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (v.34) Here is the way of Christ, the way of forgiveness and of compassion in the face of all that this world throws at Him, ourselves included. All that we have seen leading up to this moment – flawed human actions, injustice, self-interest, derision, lack of understanding hammered into His hands and feet with a hammer-blow on every nail – and what is the response? Love, grace, empathy and a willingness to receive and to accept all that was thrown at Him.

As you ponder the image in your imagination this morning let me invite you to recognise the way of Christ and how utterly different it is from anything else we experience in this world. See how Jesus looks at you and me, despite all that we are and all that we have done or failed to do, and hear His words again resounding through time to this very moment and to us: Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Take that in too, this morning.

Because thirdly I want to encourage you to look to the man on Jesus' other side and to hear his words, those words with which I began this sermon. They are addressed first to the fellow on the other cross who has just summed up the way of the world: 'Don't you fear God,' the second man said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting

what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' (vv.40-41)

We have focussed on the way of the world, and we have focussed on the way of Christ. Now let me invite you to focus on the way of faith, the way of salvation. This second man has had his eyes opened by what he has seen unfolding around him. Luke doesn't tell us what his crime was, although Matthew and Mark describe both the men on the crosses with Jesus as thieves. It would be an odd thing if those facing the death penalty for their actions did not have regrets but this man is more than regretful, he is penitent and he recognises that while he and the other thief deserve their fate, Jesus is dying an innocent man. More than that he echoes the realisation of the centurion who was in charge of the crucifixions that day (according to Matthew's account) that Jesus was surely the Son of God. "Jesus, says the penitent man, remember me when you come into your Kingdom" (v.42) and Jesus responds "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (v.43)

If this is the way of faith, the way of salvation, it is the way that I want to exhort you all to take this morning. Perhaps you have been able to see just where the way of this world leads, to injustice, to self-interest, to misunderstanding and to brokenness. Perhaps you have been able to see the alternative way that Jesus exemplifies and perhaps it gives birth to a longing within you to exchange the world's way for the way of Christ. Well, how are we to take that step? That is what the second man on the cross alongside Jesus shows us.

My friends, hard though it is to say this, we are all under the same sentence today. We may or we may not be thieves or criminals but we are all under sentence of death, as Paul says to the Romans 'the wages of sin are death' (Rom.6:23) and 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom.3:23) If you are still able to visualise the scene at Calvary, let me ask you which cross you are on. Are you bitterly blaming God for the fact that one day your life will come to an end, spitting out an unbelieving prayer for salvation and stepping resentfully into a lost eternity. Or are you willing to admit that in facing death you are ultimately getting what your deeds deserve and willing to put yourself in the

care of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. To you in your openness to receive the gracious gift of forgiveness, bought at the price of His shed blood, the sinless Son of God holds out the same promise of paradise.

I have encouraged you this morning to visualise the most unlikely enthronement in the most unlikely of throne rooms. Yet it is here that we see Jesus the King of kings inaugurate His eternal Kingdom and invite all who will receive His gift to enter into life.