



A Different Kind of King!

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY
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Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Temple Grandin is a pioneer in thinking the way animals think. She is professor at Colorado state University, with a doctorate in animal studies. Her book, *Thinking in Pictures*, describes her unique view of the world. Many of us think in patterns and words, but as a person with autism, she can think and see as animals do. It has helped her design humane ways to herd and direct animals that are not threatening to them.

Grandin's limitations caused many people to ridicule her. They thought she was stupid, which was very painful for her. Gradually, she realized the way she saw the world, wasn't stupidity. It was just a different way of thinking.

Well, there are also different ways of thinking about kings. If I were to ask you to describe what a king is like what would you say? Some might use words such as powerful, strong, wealthy, courageous, leaders, decision makers, and rulers.

Others might say the best traits of a king are authenticity, integrity, wisdom, clarity of thought, readiness to take action when necessary, an inherent sense of morality, and the ability to protect the people in his or her care. As you know, this isn't always the case.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we begin by looking at two of the kings of Jesus' day. Herod the Great and Herod Antipas.

Herod the Great was the king of Judea when Jesus was born. He was known for his huge building projects. One of them was the rebuilding of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. He was also known for the Massacre of the Innocents after Jesus' birth. He had a brutal, paranoid, and cruel personality. He was shrewd and ambitious.

He secured his power through ruthless acts, including the murder of family members and others he perceived as threats. He was an autocratic ruler and exploited his subjects through heavy taxation to fund his projects. He favored Rome over the needs of his own subjects.

Next, we have Herod Antipas the ruler of Galilee and Perea. The town of Nazareth is in Galilee. It's the town where Jesus grew up. Herod Antipas was known as King Herod in the Bible, but he was really a tetrarch. He was cunning, ambitious, and weak-willed. He had a primary role in the slaying of John the Baptist and Jesus. He sought to ingratiate himself with the Roman emperors and aspired to be named king but never achieved that goal. He was indecisive, immoral and adulterous, superstitious and guilt-ridden. Jesus called him a "fox."

And then we have Jesus, who was a different kind of king.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. There are people who don't like calling this day Christ the King Sunday because it sounds too political and autocratic to them. Autocracy rubs against their sense of freedom. When our country was formed, Americans chose to establish a democratic form of government rather than a monarchy.

In June and October of this year, there were *No Kings* protests. The demonstrators objected to what the organizers perceived as authoritarian policies. So, this is just to say, that calling Jesus a king, sounds offensive to some. But Jesus is a different kind of king. As Christians, Jesus is ultimately the ruler of our lives. His realm is very different from our world. The kingdom of God is mentioned in all four gospels, especially in Luke and Matthew. God's kingdom is one of grace where good news is brought to the poor. Release is proclaimed to the captives. Sight is given to the blind. And the oppressed are set free. "*Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep,*" Jesus says.

Jesus wasn't born in a castle or palace. He was born of lowly means to Mary and Joseph who were poor. He fulfilled three roles from the Old Testament: prophet, priest, and king. He came as a prophet, who boldly spoke the truth and told God's people what they needed to hear. He acted as a priest in that he mediated between God and God's people. And he came as a different kind of king, who people acknowledged as they accepted his sovereignty over their lives.

But, when we gaze upon Jesus hanging on the cross, he seems more like a victim than king. The Jewish people wanted a messiah who could lead them to political freedom. Jesus wasn't the model of power and leadership they were hoping for. Jesus, as king, appeared weak before the power structures of that day. In his utter degradation, he didn't seem to help in the quest for more control and dignity in their personal life. The Roman soldiers taunted him about his leadership saying, "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.*" They posted a sign on him that said, "*This is the King of the Jews.*" It was meant to ridicule him rather than honor him.

Jesus dies between two criminals, who are outside the law, those who were considered unclean and outcasts. He endures insults. He is subjected to the indignity of soldiers who gamble for his only possessions: his clothes. God's power doesn't pull the nails from Jesus' body and bring him down from the cross.

The first criminal wants what we often want: He wants the power of God through Jesus to change his circumstances. He wants to get down off the cross. He wants out of a mess. He wants help with a particular problem and Jesus doesn't offer him that kind of help nor does he show that kind of power.

Like the Jewish people, Jesus doesn't seem to fulfill our expectations about power. We, too, want power to work for us: protection, personal freedom, and intervention in our troubles. We live vulnerable lives, never knowing the danger we might face. Finding personal freedom remains a constant struggle.

Yet, we see Jesus' power exercised in a different way. We see his power in the conversations that he has while he hangs on the cross. Despite the cruelty, pain and humiliation, Jesus maintains his trust in God. His faith sustains his spirit while he endures the cross. He continues to trust God even in the worst of situations. He doesn't give in to anger, bitterness or despair. We might find this kind of inner spiritual strength elusive, but Jesus' example moves us toward that kind of faith. He shows us that we can claim power over our reactions, our feelings and our attitudes. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit works in us to empower us for this kind of faith. Jesus shows the power of forgiveness. He demonstrates that forgiveness creates

something in us: courage, charity, and humanity. Jesus becomes heroic and human, as the soldiers twist themselves into monsters and become less human. Jesus' body is broken, but his soul is not crushed. Jesus is offered savagery, but he offers them prayer. Jesus' power is a different kind of power. His power heals relationships, marriages, families, churches. It is a power that breaks down walls and leaps over chasms. It is a power that restores and repairs what others have destroyed.

And finally, Jesus shows his true nature as king, when he offers us eternal life in God's kingdom.

The second criminal recognizes his own sin and asks Jesus to remember him. Jesus promises him, "*Today you will be with me, in Paradise.*" The word "paradise" originally meant an enclosed park. It becomes the Greek word that points back to the garden from Genesis. As the people of God reflected on paradise, they came to understand that it is what awaits us. It is a good and peaceful place amid the worst of suffering. Jesus offers a place of beauty in the face of the ugliest of deaths. We can trust Jesus to open for us a place of peace, goodness, and beauty.

Reign of Christ Sunday is the end of the church year. It brings us a different way of thinking about kingship. Like Grandin's ability to think differently to connect with animals, we are able think differently to connect with God's graciousness and love for us. Jesus is a different kind of king. He has the power to shape our feelings and reactions. He gives us the power to forgive and heal. So, let us rejoice in Jesus' power to open for us a glimpse of God's heaven on earth now, and the hope of dwelling in God's kingdom in the hereafter.

In Jesus' name, amen.