Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Last Sunday after Pentecost
Feast of Christ the King – November 23, 2025

# Forgiveness and Freedom

*Jeremiah 23:1-6; Canticle 16; 2 Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43*

St. Patrick Church, Junction City, OH

**[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. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; 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 into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

Today, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, the final Sunday of the church year. Next week we begin again with the first Sunday of Advent. This feast day is unusual – it's not tied to any event in Jesus' life, nor does it come from the practices of the early church. Instead, it was instituted in 1925 in the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Pius XI and later adopted by the Episcopal Church in 1970.

Because, in 1925, Europe lived under a shadow. The First World War had ended seven years earlier, but little felt settled. Nationalism was rising, economies were faltering, and secular political movements were gaining force. Instead of the long-awaited peace, many sensed that something darker was approaching.

Into this climate, Pope Pius sought to proclaim Christ's ultimate supremacy—a reminder to emerging dictators of their limits and mortality, and a reassurance to ordinary people that God's authority and mercy endure beyond any political upheaval.

The pope did this by declaring Jesus Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who will [as our opening collect says] "free and unite all the people of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, under Christ's most gracious rule." This was vital grounding for faithful people still reeling after the war that didn't "end all wars."

Today, one hundred years later, the claim that God alone holds our ultimate allegiance is a core belief. As is the assertion that human dignity is non-negotiable across every nation and race. These are truths that must be spoken to leaders who claim outsize authority and held close by those who are harmed by that overreach.

But . . . Christ as King can be a challenging image. What kind of king is he like? A hereditary monarch? A constitutional ruler? All the kings the world has ever seen have taken their place through bloodlines, or wealth, or military might. We don't have an example of an earthly king who lived the humble, generous life that Jesus did,

eating with outcasts and healing the sick. A life of sacrificial love.

So, in trying to understand Christ as ultimate authority, it's easy to slip into earthly attributions of superior power. For example, in our opening hymn, we sang, "Crown him the Lord of life and crown him the Lord of love," but we also hailed him as the "one upon his throne whose anthem drowns all music but its own."

This conjures up zero-sum kingship, where the one with the loudest voice has the last word. But that is not Jesus. So, what kind of king might he be?

Our gospel today relates the last conversation Jesus has before he dies. He is condemned by Pilate, handed over to the Roman soldiers, and led to the place called The Skull. There, they crucify him, alongside two criminals.

The crowds are hostile and noisy, and the cruel machinery of Roman imperial power is on full display. Religious leaders and even one of the criminals mock him, shouting, "If you are the Messiah, the King of the Jews, save yourself!" But Jesus is silent, except for two statements.

First, he prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And when he is near death, one of the criminals asks Jesus to remember him. He replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Paradise. In Jewish thought of the first century, "paradise" wasn't heaven, a place where good people go after they die. Paradise was something of a paradox – it was both the original garden of God and a newly created place of delight where all is just, fair, and whole. And Jesus considers the criminal worthy of being there, with him.

Our gospel shows that in the midst of suffering, as his life is ending, Jesus focuses on reconciliation and belonging. Given the injustice being done to him, it's easy to hear "Father, forgive them," as, "Don't judge them for killing me – they don't know who I am."

But Jesus doesn't teach forgiveness as transactional, like saying, "I'll forgive you, but only if you apologize and guarantee you won't do it again." For Jesus, forgiveness is transformational -- an unearned gift of mercy, freedom, and new life.

This gift is poured out on the righteous and sinners alike, including Zacchaeus the tax collector and the woman caught in adultery. Forgiveness releases an

abundance of grace meant to restore our courage and reorient us to our truest selves.

In the canticle we sang together earlier, Zechariah gives thanks for this gift of grace: "God has come to his people and set them free. Free to worship him without fear and to give his people wholeness through forgiveness."

Forgiveness is freedom. Freedom from the bondage of the past, freedom from fear and from estrangement. Christ's ultimate authority is not a king's superior might, but forgiveness. Which brings freedom to receive God's creative and steadfast power of renewal.

In the end, Christ as King is not about rank or dominance or a throne high above us. His reign looks like the scene we hear today -- mercy offered in the middle of cruelty, belonging spoken into the ear of someone who feels beyond hope, forgiveness extended before anyone can ask for it.

His authority is not enforced by decree but revealed in compassion, in the steady work of the Spirit that refuses to let suffering or despair have the last word.

This is the world we are invited to inhabit. A world where dignity is not earned but recognized. A world where reconciliation is not conditional but whole-hearted. A world where every refusal to dehumanize another becomes a small proclamation that Christ still reigns—in us, through us, sometimes despite us.

In a time when voices of power grow louder and systems of harm feel immovable, this parish can serve as a witness to that world – in our ministries, our worship, and how we show up in daily life.

Our pledges that we will present to God today are signs of our commitment to this community and its mission. We offer them with gratitude for all the blessings in our lives and all that the Spirit is doing in our midst.

So, today and always, we remember the One whose authority is love. Let us offer ourselves again to Christ's renewing work, trusting that his life-giving authority will have the final say.

Amen.