

# The Innocent Man

To follow a weak Christ rather than a mighty king

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Last Sunday after Pentecost C  
November 20, 2016

Our church year ends this morning, the Last Sunday after Pentecost, and we end with a doozy: the crucifixion. The most fitting gospel choice for today, dubbed in 1925 as Christ the King Sunday. The day we are to celebrate the primacy of Christ over human authority. And today, we're reminded what that primacy actually looks like. It's not as a king adorned in fancy robes, but stripped naked; not respected, abused; not worshiped, mocked.

This is our King. Unjustly killed--another innocent victim to violence, humanity's true original sin.

The depth of Luke's depiction of the Crucifixion is beyond our precious few minutes this morning. We have to paint in big brush strokes, knowing any masterwork is crafted over time and our living with the incomplete canvas.

We receive this story, this most powerful moment, with its inescapable themes of sacrifice and salvation. And then juxtapose the image of the crucifixion with our views of kings. But we also may juxtapose it with how Luke begins his telling of the gospel.

Dig back in your minds to just under a year ago. We went through those first three chapters of Luke, with the dramatic entrance of the angel who visits Elizabeth and Zechariah to announce the coming birth of their son. Then visiting Mary. The songs, the angels, the shepherds, the praising in the Temple.

We remember that the angels came to announce a child was to be born who would transform the world. That child now hangs upon a cross. Having done nothing to warrant it. An innocent man.

## This is why we struggle with Jesus's kingship.

With naming Jesus as our main guy. His life and death upended power in exactly the same way he describes the kin-dom upends our world's power structure. The reversals Jesus preaches are evident in his life.

The king coming from the royal outcasts and born among the animals is easily captured, defeated. Taunted and mocked. Brutalized and tortured.

For nothing.

In Luke, Jesus doesn't blaspheme. He gives them no cause. The anger, the punishment, the vindictiveness of the Jewish leadership wasn't warranted. The state's murder of an innocent victim was public and unjust.

How completely opposite our vision of power and effectiveness. If GOD anoints a Messiah to change the world, then Jesus doesn't die. Not using American logic. GOD would anoint a Messiah to take the weapons from our enemies like Superman. To swoop in and fix all of our problems for us. To clean our slate to start over.

### **That'd be the American Messiah.**

That's just **not** GOD's Messiah in the Christ. He doesn't abuse to say we shouldn't abuse. Lie to say we shouldn't lie. Hate to say we shouldn't hate.

Our Messiah doesn't come do the hard work of reconciling the world for us. He doesn't manipulate us or fix things for us.

He shows us **his way**, **The Way** isn't to power, but to the cross. The place where power may destroy our bodies, but not our souls. Nor will it destroy our faith, our voice, our community.

If the problem is an earthly king, enthroned in power for years, then GOD revealed to us instead a Messiah, enthroned on the cross for a matter of hours.

## The Innocent Man

The writer of Luke (and Acts) makes great pains to show Jesus as innocent. He doesn't blaspheme. Or conspire to destroy Rome. Or threaten to kill anyone.

But he is tried and convicted by the Jewish leadership. He is tried and executed by the Roman government. And he is mocked by authorities, soldiers, and even one of the criminals crucified with him.

He is treated as guilty, but remains completely innocent of crimes. The church and the state killed this would-be king.

This is Jesus. The picture of our "king" then is not only weak in the face of power, but innocent in the face of injustice.

In reversing the world in his upside down economy, Jesus contrasts heavenly power by revealing the systemic evil of the earthly power.

He reveals the way of Jesus is not the way of mocking and abuse, violence, and the execution of the innocent. The ways of dominance and power are on trial, not Jesus. And in Jesus's innocence, the way of the world, the way of the emperor, of Rome, of Jewish kings and Temple leaders, all of it is proven guilty.

## Jesus also reveals salvation.

The other major theme in Luke's story is salvation. It's the source of the mocking. From the Jewish leaders who call Jesus "Messiah" to the Roman soldiers who call Jesus "king", they both mock Jesus in the same way from their own cultural context.

They look at this would-be savior with condescension and ridicule. They mock him as a dimwit. *If you save people, then you must be able to save yourself!* It's a reasonable idea. The

power which dominates and demands control would never take to its loss. They'd have to fight back, wouldn't they? Hasten an escape.

If Jesus had any power at all, he'd break those bonds, jump down, and knock some heads. Go full Samson on 'em.

To the empire, this is only logical. To a culture which values power and dominance and control? For sure. For Jesus? No. Christ offers quite the opposite.

And as for the criminals, one mocks him and looks for him to offer an escape. But the other, who respected this other way of seeing the world Jesus demonstrates, to that one Jesus offers salvation.

## This is the good news we need.

That the salvation Jesus offers isn't like our world, where the wealth and power go to the top, where it also tends to stay. The powerful jealously guard their power and protect it. But Jesus offers it freely, generously, to all manner of people.

So of course, in the midst of this upside down economy of Jesus's, in the revealing of the kin-dom through the cross, of course the one who would go with Jesus into paradise is a criminal.

The innocent man brings with him the guilty.

That's our Christ. Whatever we call him. Whatever we claim him to be. King, Lord, Messiah, Savior, Liberator, Comforter, Shepherd. That's him. Innocent, but mixing it up with the guilty. Like the rabbi with the tax collector. The ritually pure with the sick. This is his deal.

And this is the Kin-dom. Whenever we choose humility over pride with each other. When we let GOD's mercy break through the sin of our world. Or even when we let someone else have the last scoop of stuffing.

This week, may your family be well and your food delicious. May your gatherings be fruitful and hopeful. And may you have the strength to be both honest and merciful with all of these imperfect people who fill this imperfect kin-dom world.