

**What King Is This?**  
**By Dane Perry**  
**November 24, 2019**

Much of my thinking about today's Gospel passage and Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday has been influenced by the writing of David Lose, a Lutheran minister, university professor and author.

Advent begins next Sunday, and we await the coming of the Christ child. For some folks, it may seem strange to have this death story in the lectionary just as our thoughts are turning towards a birth.

Christ the King Sunday is a recent addition to the Church calendar. Introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a response to the political turmoil in Europe after the First World War and the rise of various -ism's: nationalism, secularism, fascism and communism.

Many had lost faith in the church and God. The political establishment was viewed as inept and self-serving. People were looking for like-minded communities in which to vent their fears and anger and to create scapegoats for perceived or real injustices. Reign of Christ Sunday was to remind people that there was only one ruler who could actually offer the security they craved.

Yet I think here in the United States, Christ the King Sunday is difficult for us to grasp. In the first place, most of us have not been very attuned to royalty and kings since the days of George III and the War of Independence. OK, some of us may glance at the tabloids in the supermarket line to check the latest news about Prince William and Kate and Prince Harry and Meghan.

Also, for women this feast day carries with it the centuries of sexism in the Christian tradition. Perhaps some folks are more than a little uneasy about this obviously male, hierarchical, patriarchal holy day in a culture of glass ceilings and elusive equality.

Finally, using the term "king" to describe Jesus misses a major point of the gospel because kingship for many folks implies a static sense of the status quo and oppressive governmental systems rather than the ongoing growth of God's beloved community here on earth.

The kingdom of God is not simply about replacing an earthly ruler with a heavenly one. When Jesus preached the coming Kingdom of God, he was not advocating regime change. Rather, he advocated a radically different understanding of our relationships with each other and with God. It's not the ruler that changes, but the realm in which we live.

But the kingdom -- or, maybe better, the *realm* -- of God that Jesus proclaims represents a whole new reality where *nothing* is the same -- not our relationships or rules, not our view of self or others, not our priorities or principles -- nothing. Everything we thought we knew about kings and kingdoms, in fact, gets turned on its head by Jesus.

Because Jesus's concept of a new kingdom was, and still is, difficult for people to grasp, he offered parables to give us the most vivid descriptions of the Kingdom of God. His parables astonish, exaggerate, surprise, confuse—but most of all, they overturn our preconceptions and disrupt our normalcy to demonstrate life in the God's new realm.

And so we get a sense of the kind of king that Christ will be in the story of the outrageously generous employer who throws fairness out the window and pays the same wages to both those who have been working all day and those who labored just a few hours. In this realm, loving relationships are modeled by the father who seeks and accepts again and again both his wayward and legalistic sons. A wounded traveller who is overlooked by the morally upright of society, only to be rescued by a despised foreigner, illustrates God's expectations of unconditional, universal compassion. His parables just give us a peek into the kingdom, but they are enough to let us know that everything in the realm of God will be different.

It's no surprise, then, that this understanding of "the kingdom of God" has not gained universal acceptance. If we believe that Christian faith isn't just promising our loyalty to another ruler but rather is participation in an entirely new realm, then who knows what God will expect from us.

In this new realm we cannot keep our faith private and ignore the need of our neighbors. We cannot sing majestic hymns about God's glory and ignore the plight of God's good earth. We cannot pray that God's kingdom come and yet insist our wealth were an exclusive privilege and right. The realm of God is not cast into some distant comfortable future. Rather, the realm and rule of God is all around us, calling us to live by its vision and values right now.

Let me tell you a story about what his kingdom is like.

In Chandler, Arizona, a 17-year-old named Jamal Hinton received a group text message on his cell phone that read, "Thanksgiving dinner is at my house on Nov. 24 at 3:00 P.M. Let me know if you're coming. Hope to see you all. Of course, that includes Justin and Amanda."

Something about that message, including those last two names, didn't sound right, so Jamal wrote a quick message back asking who was contacting him.

Back came the response: "Your grandma."

He wrote back, "Grandma? Can I have a picture?"

She wrote, "Of who?"

He wrote, "You, lol [laughing out loud]."

She wrote back, "Yes, I'm here at work," and onto the screen of Jamal's phone popped up a freshly taken photograph of grandma.

He took a picture of himself on his own phone, and sent it back to her to verify the message that he sent with it, which was: “You not my grandma.”

The picture Jamal was looking at on his phone was of a youthfully mature white woman working in a cubicle in Mesa, Arizona. The picture she was looking at was a 17-year-old African-American young man sitting in a classroom wearing ear buds under his hat.

There was a momentary pause, and then Jamal wrote again:  
“Can I still get a plate tho?”

And she wrote back: “Of course you can. That’s what grandma’s do...feed everyone.”

That’s how we do it in the kingdom of God: two strangers welcoming each other and breaking bread together.

By the way, after meeting each other face to face, Jamal’s whole family accepted “Grandma’s” invitation to come over for Thanksgiving dinner.

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus is on the cross. It's not the place you'd look for a king, but then again, nothing is ever quite what you expect with Jesus. After all, who would think to look for a king sleeping in a feed trough in a cowshed? He hangs between two criminals, one jeering, the other simply asking for remembrance. It's a humble request, when you think about it: just remembered, not forgotten.

And how does Jesus respond? He exceeds even the criminal's wildest expectations and promises him paradise.

What kind of king is this, who welcomes a criminal into his realm? It is a king who refuses to bend to the expectations of this world and its limited vision of worthiness or its inadequate understanding of justice. It is a king who chooses not to rule from a distance, but rather comes to meet us in our frailty and neediness. It is a king willing to embrace all, forgive all, redeem all, because that is his profoundly loving essence.

It is **our** king, who came to welcome us into his kingdom even as he asks us to recognize and to participate in that kingdom already around us.

**Our** King, the only king truly worthy of our loyalty and allegiance.