**Preaching Notes for Christ the King, Reign of Christ Sunday, Year C (November 20, 2016)**

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**[Luke 23:33-43](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=290" \l "gospel_reading)**

Because the majority of folks who read these notes live in the United States, I would guess that a large number of readers have never come face to face with a real, live king. Americans don’t have kings. Maybe we’ve seen a king on television, but it would be nearly impossible to see one in person.

So it is hard for many of us to imagine the kind of power a king has, or used to have.

Because we have no contact with real kings, the word “king” has come to be used figuratively in reference to a host of historical characters who are not the governing heads of any countries. For example, there are those who say that Elvis is the king. On television, we might see a character who carries the title of king, but again, this is a representative title. The King of England does not have much power because Great Britain is ruled not by the king, but by an elected prime minister and parliament.

But that’s not the way it was back in Jesus’ day. In his day, a king’s power was virtually absolute. Even if there were a set of laws, the king could overrule the law because, ultimately, the king’s word WAS the law.

In the time of Jesus, monarchies and kingdoms were the only kind of government people understood. Unfortunately, the nation of Israel was blessed with only one really gifted king: David. David had risen to power when, as a shepherd boy, he had slain the Philistine giant Goliath. David grew up to be an adept military commander, leading Israel to conquer not only the Philistines, but the other inhabitants of the promised land.

Eventually he supplanted Saul, who had been Israel’s first king. Under David’s kingship Israel’s power rose. But that power was short-lived. It lasted only as long as David lived.

David’s son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, but Israel declined as a nation under his rule and became a lesser power in the ancient world. After David, Israel was forever looking back to the glory days and praying for a new David to be born, a great king who would be able to lead Israel into new military conquest and re-establish it as a world power.

By the time Jesus was born, Israel had been looking for a new David for nearly a thousand years. Israel had seen their country desecrated by the Syrians and conquered by the Babylonians. Solomon’s temple had been sacked and burned. And though the temple had been rebuilt, the kingdom was gone.

Syria and Babylonia were replaced as dominant world powers, first by Greece under Alexander the Great, and then by Rome, under the command of a skilled military leader named Julius Caesar.

By the time Jesus was born, Israel was a conquered nation, ruled by Rome. Israel had rebelled once against Rome, but the revolt had been crushed and the temple sacked and burned for a second time. And although under the watchful eye of Rome, a third temple had been recently built, it was no longer a symbol of national power and pride. It was, instead, a token temple built by Herod, a puppet of Rome, and was run by an ingrained and corrupt hierarchy of Jewish priests.

By the time that Jesus was born, the people of Israel were not just looking for their long-awaited king; they were *desperate* for him.

Recall that when Jesus was born, wise men came from the East, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” And when Herod heard about this, he was extremely upset because he knew very well that the people were looking for and longing for a new David to rise up and overthrow both him and the yoke of Rome.

In fact, if Jesus would have let them, the people would have proclaimed him as the long-awaited king. They had plenty of evidence. There was the extraordinary testimony of the wise men from the east who claimed that it was written in the stars that a great king had been born in Israel and that one star had outshone all the rest and had moved and led them to Bethlehem where Jesus was born.

In addition to this, when Jesus grew into adulthood, John the Baptist started preaching that the time was ripe for a king to arise from the people. He began baptizing people to get them ready for this event. When Jesus came to be baptized by John, there was a miraculous sign from heaven proclaiming Jesus to be the one chosen of God. John said Jesus was the person for whom he had been preparing everyone.

Then there was the matter of Jesus’ exceptional ability as a teacher and healer. The crowds flocked to hear his teaching. They brought the sick, the crippled, the broken in spirit to him for healing. They thought he was the one sent from God to save them.

After Jesus multiplied the five loaves of bread and two fish into enough food to feed the multitudes, they tried again to crown him their king. And finally, at the end of his meteoric rise to fame, when Jesus finally went to Jerusalem, the people, thinking that at last he was going into the capital city to allow himself to be proclaimed the king, lined up along the roads and cheered wildly. They even threw their cloaks on the ground before him to make a carpet for his feet.

But Jesus took great pains to enter the city in the most humble manner possible. He came riding in, seated on a donkey.

In Jerusalem, the high priests in the temple were waiting for their first opportunity to send the temple guards to arrest Jesus on trumped-up charges. When they made their move, they must have been very surprised and overjoyed at his lack of resistance.

In their formal charges, they were careful not to mention the word “king.” They accused Jesus only of blasphemy.

But the Roman governor thought that Jesus was a king because, after the high priests had Jesus taken to Pilate to be sentenced, Pilate asked Jesus point-blank, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus never answered directly. He just pointed out that his kingdom was not of this world because if it had been, his followers would have fought and not allowed him to be handed over to the weak Jewish hierarchy of temple priests.

Jesus was the king who refused to be. He never claimed the kingdom that the people were eager to hand him. He never sought that kingdom. Instead, he spoke only of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus spoke many times of these kingdoms. Most of his parables were about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

Two of the gospels tell us that after Jesus was baptized and received the sign from heaven that he was God’s chosen one, he went into the wilderness to fast and pray and consider what he was to do with the power he had been given. There he decided not to use the power for himself, ever. And from that point forward, he started preaching that the people were to turn, repent, and believe the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand.

Jesus’ message was always that people were not to let their hearts be ruled by any earthly king, but by the word of God. The Gospel of John says that Jesus was the Word of God, and that his life was the lived, definitive example of how a person should live as a resident of God’s kingdom.

There is no place where that example can be seen more plainly than in the crucifixion. While on the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

The rulers scoffed at him saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers mocked him, saying, “If you are the king of the Jews save yourself!” Jesus made no reply.

I doubt any of us has ever seen a real, live king face to face. I certainly haven’t.

But one thing I do keep in my heart and mull over and over is the story of Jesus, the one who absolutely refused to be a king, and who, therefore, became for me and for all of us the king of all kings.