



Sunday Sermon
November 23, 2025
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Feast of Christ the King

Jeremiah 23: 1-6
Luke 23: 33-43

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.
AMEN.

In 1925, Pope Pius XI, looked out and saw dark clouds of authoritarianism on the horizon. In Rome, Mussolini had risen to power through division and violence. Oppression in Soviet Russia was becoming institutionalized. In Germany, thugs were spewing anti-semitic rot under the leadership of a charismatic failed Austrian painter. Too few were taking Hitler seriously in 1925. Seeing the danger before others, Pius XI issued a Papal Encyclical, *Quas Primas*. With clarity, he spoke out against authoritarianism and emerging fascism. He instituted the Feast of Christ the King as a liturgical reminder of our primary citizenship in Christ. The Encyclical was a clarion call to all Christians to spiritually center their lives in Lordship and the way of Jesus, not in false ideologies and political movements of hate and division.

One hundred years later after *Quas Primus*, we now see similar foreboding clouds on the horizon. Putin's continues brutal war of aggression. Trump's kleptocracy and racism in plain sight. Numerous petty autocrats and oligarchs plundering and wreaking chaos. All authoritarian regimes from Imperial Rome to today's Kremlin and White House, see the world as winners and losers. Community is the enemy; empathy is weakness. Might does make right. Jeremiah saw such rulers in his time, these "shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of [God's] pasture."

To be sure, it is tempting to take solace in our relative peace on the Sunshine coast. But if we look closely, we can see the effects of a more authoritarian world in our own community.

We pass dear ones on the street struggling with poverty, addiction, and mental illness—or all three—with not enough support. We see our fragile earth on a tipping point of ecological peril. We see the continuing injustice done to indigenous peoples, the effects of racism, sexism and homophobia. These are not academic concepts but lived realities of people in our neighborhoods. Too often, we just don't know what to do.

But here the mystery of the gospel and the true nature of Jesus' Kingship give us the way. It is in our powerlessness that we inherit Christ's superpower. But before we can receive this superpower, we must be willing to change, to be converted. And C.S. Lewis once noted that, "Every story of conversion is a story of blessed defeat."⁽¹⁾

To be sure, today's gospel story looks every bit like a defeat. It would appear to be an unlikely story for an assertion of Jesus' Kingship. We come to the place of The Skull, a scene we would expect on Good Friday rather than a regal feast for our King. But here it is. Jesus has been betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, and is being executed. Nails have been driven into his hands and feet. Our king has been hoisted onto crossed timbers. As his muscles lose their strength, his body will sag, and he will suffocate as his bodily weight impedes his ability to breathe.

Naked and in indescribable pain, he is close to death. Others taunt, torture, and mock him as a faux king. He seems powerless and to those in power, less than human. For those devoted to emperors or looking for a worldly, warrior messiah, he is a failure and a nothing. Yes, this is defeat, and spectacles and cruelty like this prop up the earthly rulers even to this day.

And yet there is something else going on here. To use words again from C.S. Lewis, this time from Narnia, there is a deeper magic at work. ⁽²⁾ The relentless God who keeps forgiving and offering life is within this body that is being crucified. In death, Jesus speaks God's words of love and life, even to his tormentors, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Father, forgive...

And let me be clear: Jesus' powerlessness is not weakness but the greatest of strength. It is the power to practice peace in the face of cruelty. And this is not cheap forgiveness. He is the one who suffers evil and violence. And yet, he forsakes retribution, opens his heart as portal to God and God's unbounded love. He is saying in different words from the cross, take eat, this is my body. Deep magic, indeed.

If now widen our perspective, we see that Jesus is not alone. He is being crucified with two others. Permit me give them imaginary names, I will call the first, Menashe, and the second, Eldad, so that we can keep them straight because they have much to teach us by the choices that they make. (3)

Menashe derided him, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” He could only see salvation through power, and power against other powers. Menashe is without hope and has turned in his last moments to putting another down—lower than himself—as his last comfort. I am a mess but you are worse. He chose to become, even on his cross, to be a mini version of his tormentors. In a world of coercive power, he cannot imagine anything beyond that. All he has left is cynicism and acceptance.

Eldad seems something else. Even on the cross, some grace has given him the ability to see differently. He sees not separation but communion. Perhaps, his conversion came as he heard Jesus forgive his tormenters. We don’t know. But we see Eldad move to compassion and action. He finds his voice, a voice to speak on behalf of another. He shows care and empathy for his fellow sufferer. Eldad speaks out against Menashe’s taunting. Even from his cross filled with a dying man’s pain and loneliness, he makes communion with Jesus. He also confesses, naming that he has been condemned justly. Eldad understands that he is a sinner. Seeing the glory of Jesus even on the cross, he does ask that to be spared his fate, rather he sees a kingdom coming and asks to be remembered: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Ah, here it is - the blessed defeat. Eldad had let go of all that was before, all past allegiance and assumptions about the world and cast his lot with this Jesus.

At the crucifixion, Jesus reveals the character of his kingship: he is a sovereign-defined sacrificial love. He forgives even the seemingly unforgivable. He redeems the one asking for remembrance and forgiveness. And he points to a kingdom, a beloved community, which is mystically present and is to come.

And likewise, once a thief, Eldad, shows us qualities of citizenship in Jesus’ kingdom - speaking out for another, empathy, seeking forgiveness, and asking our king to hold us in his community of the beloved. The way forward is not the way of Menashe. And yet, in the sovereign realm of Christ, we should not give up on Menashe. We don’t know what might have changed in him as he listened to Jesus and Eldad. We should never give up on the deeper magic, which brings me to a moment in my early ministry.

Years ago, I worked as a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital. In that system, I was sort of a king...I had keys, ID, freedom, and authority. When I arrived, I felt important because I was from the outside coming in—the professional, the sane. For too long, I was Menashe: judging and distancing. I assuaged my own pain by seeing others as condemned and broken.

At the hospital, I came to know Mark, a schizophrenic, who had been in and out of the hospital for years. He was sort of my regular acolyte. One December day, Mark was strangely out of sorts, skipping his usual ministration. After the service, he went out and sat on an icy bench, and so I joined him. After a profound silence, he told me how he had lost his sister in Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland five years before. Mark was wounded in so many ways. But now it was my turn to be silent. I, too, was so wounded. I told Mark my story, about my father and Air Canada 747. We did not know until that moment that we were in bound of tragedy that could be grace if we let it. We had our crosses; we were a bit lost. But we were not alone, not now. To this day, when I reflect on that moment of wounded hearts in the love of Christ, I cannot identify who was ministering to whom.

On a bench, in bleak midwinter, Mark invited me to be converted, to become Eldad rather than Menache. I am still in that process of that blessed defeat as are we all. The deeper magic of our King, Jesus, comes to us through an unexpected forgiving and overwhelming love that says, “I am with you in joy and suffering.” Through our King’s magnificent defeat and our blessed defeat, we will be one forever. Jesus abides within this kin-ship of love whenever two or three so gather. Jesus’ promise to Eldad should sing in our hearts. So as we move to this table to re-member Jesus, let us sing that song: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

(1) Citation lost.

(2) Lewis uses the phrase “deeper magic” in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, from his Narnia series

(3) Meneche in Hebrew means “one who forgets;” Eldad means “God has loved.”