

“Saved Today”
Luke 23:33-43
November 20, 2016
Christ The King Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Lots of you know one of the saints of this church who went home to be with God a couple of years ago, Carolyn Curtis. There are so many ways in which we miss Carolyn, from Thursday Bible Study to Presbyterian Women, to her encouraging presence in worship. But I admit that one of the things I miss is her wisdom. Years ago she told me that she had been approached by a young man who was filled with that good evangelistic spirit who wanted to know if Carolyn was saved. Now Carolyn had been in church her whole life and no one knew Jesus better than Carolyn. So she said that she was saved. And the young man asked her “When?” When were you saved? What was the date? The time? Where were you when you were saved? And Carolyn told me that she didn't know what to say. She loved Jesus more than anything but she had never had a “conversion experience” that she could pinpoint. She said she didn't know. But she thought about that conversation for a long time, and I'm sure she talked it over with Willard and she came to a conclusion. Any time after that, if she was ever asked if she was saved, she would say “Yes, certainly.” And if anyone asked her when and where that happened, she would say, “In about the year 30 A.D. On a hill outside of Jerusalem.”

Great answer. The text we read today may seem a strange one to have on the Sunday before Thanksgiving and Advent, which starts next week, but today is our celebration of Christ the King. This is the Sunday when we reaffirm, in the midst of all that is happening in the world around us, with all the competing loyalties of our lives, with all that demands our attention, with all our commitments of time and money that go to so many things, that as Christians we have one ultimate loyalty, one king, Jesus Christ. And this may seem strange because this king of ours is represented primarily not by a crown or a throne or a scepter, but by a cross, an instrument of death. Why is that? What kind of king do we proclaim him to be?

Jesus is Lord of all. We proclaim this truth unequivocally because for far too long we Christians have

lived as if Jesus' reign is partial. We cede small amounts of territory in our hearts, churches and lives to Jesus' rule - but only those spaces and places of our choosing. We hand over our pocket change on periodic Sundays and think God ought to be darn thankful we showed up at all. Think of all the other places we could be! We are busy. We have demanding jobs, multiple responsibilities, options, so many options, for how to spend our time and resources. You are welcome, Jesus, we are here! Oh, and let me see what's left in the bottom of my purse to put in the plate.

We forget with ease the radical and total demands of the gospel. Jesus is Lord of all. Christ is King. There is no aspect of our lives or our world that is not subject to his rule. And as uncomfortable as it makes us, the symbol of his rule is the cross. Jesus bids us come and die. Die to your old self. In Christ you are a new creation. Die to your dearest connections. Whoever does not hate mother and father cannot follow me. Die to your most cherished possessions. Sell all you have and give it to the poor. Die to your professional identity and the status, community and money it brings. Drop your nets and become a fisher of people. Die to your sense of righteousness and all the religious rules you hold so dear. Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice. Die to your need to win. The first will be last. Die to your desire for vengeance. Love your enemies. Die to yourself. Those who lose their lives will save them.¹ This is the kind of king we have. And for once in my life I'm going to disagree with Carolyn Curtis. Am I saved? Yes I am. When was I saved? Like the dying thief on the cross—today. Today I am saved. Is that a strange answer? It was strange to give to the thief that day as well. But when he turns to Jesus and says, Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” When he says that, “today” does not mean just this day, this 24-hour period, it means now. It means it begins now and continues on and on. It means that he is in a new condition from now on—paradise. I imagine the thief, Dismas tradition says his name was, looked around at the weeping crowd, at his own cross, at the blood and the pain and the death present there

¹ Duffield, Jill. *Reflections on the Lectionary*. November 14, 2016. Presbyterian Outlook.

that day and thought, “doesn't look much like paradise to me.” But it was. It was being present with Christ. Sometimes that happens in suffering, sometimes it happens in a boring committee meeting, sometimes it happens in a glorious celebration, sometimes it happens when we are embraced in the most loving arms ever. Wherever we are present with Christ and he is king, is paradise. And it begins today. Because our king came to die. And our king came to bring us to new life, not just two thousand years ago, not just in some heavenly paradise after we die, but today.

There's an old Buddhist story about the Monkey King. Once upon a time there was a kingdom of monkeys. They were ruled by a very large and very wise monkey king. The monkeys lived near a stand of mango trees which ran alongside a river and enjoyed a constant supply of these delicious fruits. One day the king noticed a castle being built downstream from the mango trees. He ordered the monkeys to gather all the mangoes from the trees. They dutifully responded, and collected all the mangoes bar one which was hidden behind a bird's nest.

One day this mango fell from the tree into the river. The human king who inhabited the recently built castle was taking a swim when the mango floated by. He picked it up, and after learning from his Prime Minister that it was a delicious fruit, he ate it. So impressed was he that the human king determined to gain more mangoes, and set out with his guards in search of the mango trees.

When the human king found the mangoes he also found the monkeys. Though the monkeys were willing to share the mangoes with him, the human king wasn't. Deciding he would have all the mangoes for himself he order his soldiers to pursue and slay the monkeys.

When news of this reached the wise monkey king he sadly knew that the day he feared had arrived. The soldiers chased the monkeys through the forest until they came to the edge of a tall cliff. The monkey king knew that if he could get his subjects across the other side they would be safe. But how to do it?

The monkey king took his huge body and used it to form a bridge between the cliffs. One by one his subjects climbed over him to safety. The king grew increasingly wearied and bruised, but knew he must

hold on. As the monkey's scrambled across their king grew ever weaker, yet still he held on. Finally, when the last monkey had cross the bridge, the monkey king collapsed.

The human king had witnessed the whole scene from high on the hill. He was so moved by the monkey king's sacrifice that he ordered his guards to find a way down the rocky cliff and rescue the monkey king. The guards found him, barely alive, and brought him back to the king. The human king ordered his best doctors to care for the monkey king and waited from him to regain consciousness. When he did so the human king asked "You are their king, why did you bother to die for them?"

The monkey king replied, "Because I am their King". And with that, he died.²

And his subjects lived. And life is what our king brings to us. We are saved. Today. Today life begins anew. Today we are saved.

2 "What Do You Think My Friend?" (www.serve.com/cmtan/buddhism/Stories)