

Where the King belongs

[Luke 23:33-43](#)

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Earlier this year, as some of you may remember, our country's existence was under threat. The leader of a very powerful neighbour was making some very pointed comments about how Canada doesn't make sense as an independent nation, and that we really had no choice but to surrender our sovereignty and be absorbed by the empire next door, and that if we refused, they would use economic force, tariffs and trade wars, to force us to submit, to drive us into poverty so that we would come crawling into their open arms. And I remember at the time, people started asking: how will our leader respond to these clear threats to our existence? Not our prime minister or our premiers or elected officials, no, our real leader – the King of Canada, our King, Charles III, long may he reign? How will Charles respond? What is King Charles going to do to defend this realm? And as you may remember, what King Charles did was, he made a speech. A very lovely speech, and he actually came all the way over to Canada to make it. He opened Parliament in Ottawa – the first time a sitting monarch attended the opening of parliament in almost fifty years – with a rousing speech celebrating Canada's independence and sovereignty, and everyone was very impressed, and then he went home. And then a few weeks later, he invited the

leader who threatened us to come over for a fancy dinner party – a state visit with all the pomp and circumstance, and they toasted each other and made speeches to each other about their special relationship and all the trade deals they were going to make together, and it kind of made his speech here look a little less impressive in retrospect. And don't get me wrong, I don't blame Charles for this, God save him. It isn't really his fault. He just kind of does what he's told. He's a 'King', sure, but he's not a real king – he's a figurehead, a kind of poseable action figure for governments to play with – give him a speech to make, a ribbon to cut, a charity to fund, a fox to hunt, whatever you need, and he will happily show up in his fanciest costume and pointiest hat, he will perform his ceremonial duties, and then go back to his opulent palace to wait in storage, surrounded by piles of money and stolen jewels, until he's needed again. That's what it means to be a King today – that's where a King belongs: a face on the money, a puppet on the stage, moving so smoothly you almost can't see the strings.

And again, don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of this kind of monarchy, because the alternative is much, much worse. The damage that a King like Charles can do is pretty limited when you compare to the Kings who actually have power and actually use it. We don't always call them King – sometimes they're called President, Supreme Leader, Fuhrer, Chairman, Generalissimo, or CEO. They're men – for some reason, almost always men – men with power and wealth who use

that power and wealth to gain more power and wealth, for themselves and for their friends and allies. These kings belong on private jets flying to private islands for private parties all paid for with public funds. They treat the rest of the world and all the people in it as resources to be consumed and then disposed of. It feels like those kinds of Kings are everywhere nowadays, and compared with that, poor old Chuck seems positively charming, sitting up at night waiting by the phone, hoping for someone to call so he can put on his crown and be helpful. Some of our kings are figureheads, but some of them are tyrants, and if those are the only two options, I know which one I'd rather have.

And the people in Luke's world when he was writing his gospel knew the same kinds of Kings. Some of their Kings were figureheads – leaders in positions of wealth and privilege who had very little power, just going through the motions on behalf of the real powers behind the scenes. The priests in Jerusalem, carrying out the sacrifices, they were respected and admired and comfortable, but they only kept those positions as long as they kept their people obedient to the empire. They put a happy face and a religious veneer on the tyranny and oppression that was going on all around them. Even King Herod, who posed and preened and acted like somebody important, was ultimately just a figurehead, enjoying the wealth and comfort bestowed on him by his masters in Rome. Those were the real Kings – the

tyrants, emperors, caesars, Augustus, Tiberias, Caligula, Claudius, Nero. They had all the power, and they were more than happy to use it, to bring their ideas of order and justice and civilization to the world around them, enlisting all these lesser collaborators to work with them and for them in keeping the peace, keeping the wealth flowing towards Rome. In Jerusalem, if you wanted to be a King, you could be a figurehead or a tyrant, but that's it.

So anyone walking on their way to Jerusalem that day, walking past the place called the Skull, if they happened to slow down and look at the criminals dying there for long enough to read the inscriptions, they would've been in for quite a shock. Hanging above the condemned man, as he struggles and suffers and dies, it reads, This is the King of the Jews. And that makes no sense. That's not where a King belongs. Kings should be figureheads, comfortable and obedient, or they should be tyrants, powerful and terrifying. They shouldn't be criminals. They don't belong on a cross. And everyone who sees the sign knows this is true – the soldiers mock him, saying “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” The leaders scoff at him, saying “He saved others, let him save himself, if he is the Messiah, God's chosen one.” Even the criminal beside him joins in, saying, “Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself – and us too, while you're at it.” Because that's what Kings do – they save themselves. That's the very first rule of being a king – take care of yourself, protect yourself, make yourself great and wealthy and

powerful no matter what the cost, whether you do that by crushing all your enemies or by serving other more powerful kings, whether you're a tyrant or a figurehead, it's the same basic principle – Kings save themselves. Everyone in this story – temple leaders, soldiers, criminals, they all understand what Kings are supposed to do, where Kings are supposed to belong. If this man is a King, he should come down from the cross and either find himself a comfortable palace where he can give speeches and cut ribbons, or else take over the world. That's what Kings do, that's where Kings belong.

But the man on the cross doesn't seem to understand what the rest of Jerusalem knows about Kings. He refuses to be either a figurehead or a tyrant, he refuses to be the kind of King they all know and expect. Instead of using power to gain more power, he empties himself of all power, all possessions, he gives everything away. Instead of conquering or collaborating with cruelty, he forgives. He acts in a way that runs completely counter to everything we expect to see in a King, and yet it's the other criminal dying beside him who sees him for who he truly is. "We have been condemned justly, we are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong – he is righteous, innocent, and yet he accepts the world's condemnation, he willingly lays down his life, he refuses to save himself. And by doing so, he saves others. The second criminal asks him "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," and Jesus answers – "today you will be

with me in paradise,” and in that moment, a criminal is transformed into a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, a lost sinner is found and brought home. Instead of coming down from the cross to save himself, Jesus stays on the cross to save the life of someone all the other kings in the world considered worthless, expendable, fit only for destruction. Jesus goes to the cross because he knows this is where a King belongs, this is where a true King belongs. Not a figurehead or a tyrant, not a King who saves himself, but a king who saves others, a King who runs towards the danger, who leaves behind the places of comfort and security and complicity in order to rescue and redeem the lost, to lift them up and bring them into the everlasting kingdom, that’s where a King belongs. That’s where Jesus Christ belongs.

And we are the body of Jesus Christ. We are his church. So where do we belong? As the body of Christ, his representatives in the world, where do we belong? There have been times in the history of the church where we have acted as if Jesus is a tyrant; we have tried to use the gospel to control and dominate and assimilate those who are different from us, to bring them under our power and bring order and security to an earthly empire. And there have been times in the history of the church where we have treated Jesus as a figurehead, as a friendly smiling mascot who never asks us to do anything difficult or challenging, someone we can use to make ourselves comfortable and secure, so we can keep trying to

save ourselves. And that is not the kind of King we are meant to follow. That's not the kind of King we are called to serve. Our King gives up his power in order to rescue the powerless. Our King answers cruelty with forgiveness, evil with righteousness, hatred with love. Our King goes to the heart of the brokenness so that our brokenness might be healed. Our King enters into death in order to defeat it. And if that's where the King belongs, then that's where the church belongs too. That's where we belong. At the cross. We are called to stop following figureheads, stop fearing tyrants, and instead spend our lives seeking and searching for the lost, all the people our world considers worthless and expendable, because we know that when we were lost and worthless, the King of Kings found us and made a place for us in his kingdom. All around us, the kings of this world are still fighting for more power, more wealth, more control, and in the midst of the clamour of their speeches and boasts, the voice of Jesus Christ is still calling, the voice of grace and righteousness and life that is stronger than death is still calling, calling us to follow our King through death into life, through poverty into everlasting glory, through the cross into the resurrection and the kingdom of heaven on the other side. Today, may we listen for the voice of the King who saves. Today, may we know where we truly belong. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!