

The Rev. Billy Cervený:

So today is, the last Sunday of our liturgical calendar. Did you know it was the end of the year? You did? What are you doing to celebrate? You're. Here is the last day of our liturgical calendar. It's called Christ the King Sunday. What that means is, not only is it the last year of the liturgical calendar, but next week starts advent, the Christmas season.

There you go. Blood pressure up. Time to get moving. Get your lights out. But here we go. And today we are talking about. And we're studying a bit more about the kingship of Jesus. What does it mean that he is king and he sits on the throne? But what does it mean that we, as his creation? How do we grapple with that idea?

We read Luke 23, and it's this passage that normally when I when I just read, it's normally this passage that we would associate with Easter because it's a crucifixion story. But when we push the lens in a little bit, which I'm about to do again, like I said, it's a masterclass in the idea of Jesus being the king.

And so masterclass also, and looking at our own hearts and what we contend with when we try to understand His lordship over our lives. So, the story, you guys are familiar with it. Jesus has been arrested. He's been brought before the high priest. He's been brought before Pontius Pilate. This kangaroo court, they found him guilty. They've beaten him and they have taken him out of the city.

And it says in verse 33, when they came to the place that's called the skull, there they crucified him. And the criminals on one on his right and one on his left. If this were a movie, the way I always like to think of these, these passages, if you could imagine a wide camera angle panning over Golgotha, the skull to the hillside upon which Jesus was crucified, and in that camera angle you'd see an assortment of people.

You'd see Roman soldiers that are standing guard, that are nailing them to the cross. You'd see the Jewish leaders who were there accusing him, the people that he had rallied, to, to celebrate his demise. And you see his supporters huddled in the corner. The people that love Jesus, his

disciples. And as you, everyone is there, as you see these people, you'd see, you'd feel the tension because everyone is there.

They're there for a different reasons. But one thing they all have in common, a couple things they have in common. None of them is indifferent about what's going on right now. They all are there, and it is incredibly tense. Not even the Romans, because the Romans. This is just another day at the office. But you can tell even they are there with an extra measure of energy to nail this man to the cross.

And we overhear these conversations as this camera angle goes over. And I'll tell you what I'm struck by what I hear. And what I hear is there's a not so many questions that are being asked in that moment, and it's really easy to read over those when you read this passage. And there's some of the questions are being asked or rhetorical, and some of them they're being asked, they're not really framed as questions, but they really are questions.

And one trick I want to teach you about understanding scripture. If you're ever reading the Bible and you're reading a passage, you want to understand what it's just really trying to tell me. And there's a lot of questions in that passage. When you see a lot of questions, you always stop, stop because there's your entry point and what you do is you want to you want to ask questions of those questions.

And what you want to say is what's at stake for the person asking this, like, what's pushing that question out? Or what's at stake for the person that's being asked this question? And is there something deeper the author is trying to say here? And if it is, I promise you it's going to point and put its finger right into the middle of what's going on in your own heart.

And in this passage, there's two questions that row that rise out to me. And the first one is, are you not the king? Are you not the king? And the second question we hear from the thief on the cross, and he says, do you not fear God? And I want to look at those individually. We'll start with the first one.

Are you not the king?

When we read this passage, we just read that question is asked probably four times in different ways or implied. You got the Roman soldiers talking about, aren't you the king of the Jews? And then you have the thief that's mocking Jesus and the Jewish people who are trying to deny his credibility and justify what they're doing. And they're asking this question, are you not the King?

They're not asking it just because it's a good question. They're asking you because it is the question. It is the central question to all of this. In fact, I would say that that question, are you not the king forms the backdrop against which all of the Gospels are written? All of them. Now, this thing for us as Americans, it's kind of lost on us.

We hate as Americans, we hate this idea of a king. It's kind of baked into the cake of our our culture. We have political protests called No King rallies. Right. We have this Pavlovian response, this kind of gag reflex that, no, we don't do King's. We're Americans, we're free. No one tells us what to do but these people.

Then we read about the story. The Jews and the Romans. They don't have an issue with this. They love the idea of a king. They love the idea of a king. They just disagree on the kind of king they wanted. You see, you have the Jewish leaders. They wanted a king in the line of David that would rise up.

They would take the throne, that would establish Israel's glory and would push the Romans out. And the Romans, what they wanted is they had a king and they called him an emperor, and it was Pax Romana. It was Roman peace. It was peace through military force. None of this turn. The other cheek kind of stuff. You were going to keep people like Israel at bay.

But one thing they had in common, they brought them here on this hillside that caused them both to agree to nail the sky to the cross. Neither one of them wanted Jesus to be their king. Jesus's turn the other cheek. Philosophy Jesus, love thy neighbor, love your enemy. Philosophy cut against what Rome was and his challenge for people to examine their hearts and not to just get lost in the legalistic self-righteousness of the culture that had grown around the temple at that moment, was a threat, a job threat to the Pharisees and the scribes and all the leaders in that time.

But they came together to crucify Jesus. And the point was this they both are committed to this idea of a king, that just their idea of a king, they wanted the king that they wanted. They wanted a king that would give them the outcomes that they wanted. And they were so committed to that. They were so committed to having a king that would give them the outcomes.

They wanted it. They it blinded them. It blinded them so much that when the real king finally arrived, they didn't recognize him. And not only did they not recognize him as a king, they hated him so much. So, they nailed him to a cross right here.

It's pretty rough. Pretty hard, pretty hard. Hardest thing to do. But before we judge them, I gotta say, our hearts aren't that much different. I'll tell you what I mean. I told the story at our men's retreat last year. We'll share it with you. When I was a younger man, growing up and around here, I never was really great with the idea of authority.

I never loved having authority over me. Of course, that is, that is something that runs deep for all teenagers, right? But for me, it kind of ran a little deeper. And when I had this, I had two fascinations. When I was a young guy with two of them, one, I was fascinated with motorcycles and I was fascinated with motorcycle culture.

My favorite movies were movies like Easy Rider. I used to read these memoirs about the Hells Angels. My favorite character when I was a little boy was Fonzie. Come on. I loved motorcycle culture because to me it was a picture of freedom. It was this picture that no one got to tell me what to do. I could just ride and be free, and I just was my own.

I was my own boss. I didn't play well in Ortega. So when I graduated from high school, I went off to college in New England. One of the first things I did, I grew my hair to my chest. I brought a bought a black motorcycle jacket and then a 1967 Harley-Davidson chopper, which was gorgeous. And it was so loud it would set off car alarms when I'd go down the street.

And this is before, you know, it was back when we had car alarms. I found a group of buddies of mine that kind of bought into the same thing, and we all had motorcycles. We all were into this idea that no one was going to tell us what to do. Well, you know, just to give you a little context, I was 20 something years old.

I was this, you know, white private school kid from 14 kids. They were a bunch of prep school kids. So we were just kind of playing dress up a little bit, having fun with it. But one day we, we began to have this conversation. We began to believe our outfits a little too much, and we decided, you know, if we're gonna live this, if we're going to do this.

You know, we needed to do. Let's go to a biker bar, man. Yeah. We knew there was this place in East Hartford where we lived, and it was. Which is a really hard part of town. Have you ever been to Harvard? Harvard is not a it's a rough city. And East Hartford, there was this biker bar and we're like, yeah, let's go check this out.

Let me just for clarity sake, there are two types of, of motorcycle establishments. There are motorcycle bars. This is where you go and you meet people that love to ride motorcycles, that share a common interest. You hang out, you talk about things, you have a common interest, and you build relationships. And then there are biker bars. And biker bars are for people who ride motorcycles, but also have warrants out for their arrest.

And I patches from knife fights. This is this is what that is. The place we were going was the latter and we didn't fully understand the difference at that point. So that night we drove down. We got on our bikes. There's five of us. We're going down into East Hartford. We're all driving in a in a formation like, you know, in a row.

And we were pulling up to the bar, and we were going a little too fast. And I got distracted because there was a row of 20 motorcycles right in front. And these, these guys standing next to it that were hard looking. And I just remember looking over thinking, oh my gosh, what are we doing? And I looked up and my buddy had stopped right before in front of me.

And I had not seen it, and I was heading right towards him. So I slammed on the brakes and my motorcycle started skidding sideways, and I was heading towards this line of motorcycles. I was going to die, and I knew that if I didn't die hitting the motorcycles, that those fine gentleman were going to kill me. So, I had literally in a panic.

I just accelerated my motorcycle and in one fell swoop, it went around in a 180 and landed me perfectly in a parking spot.

And in that moment, you know, you act like you meant to do it. So, I get off the motorcycle, I, I walk into the to the established into the bar, and I go straight to the men's room, and I put my face in my hands as I collapse against the wall, thinking to myself, what am I doing? Because in that moment it became very clear.

It was so sobering. I saw myself clearly. I saw where I was clearly what was I doing? What was I listening to? Who was I following in that place? Let me ask you a question. You remember my goal and all this. Nobody gets to tell me what to do. Had I achieved it.

Was I sitting on the throne of my life? No. Sure. I may have evicted my, you know, high school teachers or my parents or my cultural norms from the throne of my life. But that doesn't mean that I was sitting on the throne right at that moment. In fact, all I had done was swapped out what I was allowing to sit there.

I had just taken this caricature that I had cobbled together from watching Easy Rider movies and the Hells Angels books and put it together, put it on the throne. I was like, this thing promises me freedom if I just dress this way, if I just acted this way, if I just rode this, if I just went to these places, I surrounded myself with these kind of people.

Then I would be free.

But it didn't work right, did it? You know, I say that that was the king that was sitting on my throne. I can hear you say, well, you know, Billy, I get it. But like, that wasn't real. Exactly. It

wasn't real. And we all do this, and we can't help it. You see, we're made in God's image. You're made in God's image.

I'm made in God's image. And part of that being made in God's image is this he has hardwired you as an image bearer to look at the original image. You are hardwired that your heart constitutionally cannot stop looking for the original image, because it's the only way you make sense. And when we look at that original image, we're not just looking at to make sense of ourselves, which is true, but we look at it as an authority over our lives.

I look at it for me to tell me what to do, to how to act, what I, who I should be. I look at it as my king. That's the way it was hardwired into me. I was hard wired for a king. And when sin comes in and it separates me from God, and we evict God from the throne of our hearts, it is so easy and it's so fun for Christians to say.

And I know because I've said it myself, when we kick God off the throne of our hearts, guess what? We just take his place. We just do sit in that place like me on that motorcycle. Only I get to tell me what I get to do. I got to tell you, that's a lie. That is a lie. That is your pride whispering in your ear and lying to you.

Romans 1:25. Paul's talking to these people who have who, who are lost in sin. And he says they've exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and they've worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator. Sure. And our sin we remove God from the throne. But you are deluding yourself if you think that you are taking his place because you were made to serve something like the Dylan song, you going to serve something and you can't remove one king without crowning another.

And of course you're in control of who or what gets to wear the crown. But I'll tell you this. It's never you. It's never you. So it's not a question of if you're serving a king. The question I want to ask you is, which one do you serve it? Who's your king? For me, it was that caricature I built.

And I can tell you it's been a lot of other things since then, but what is it for you? Let me tell you. Let me give you a little trick. This is how you find out. What's that one thing, that one person that one aspect of your life that if it ceased to be in your life, are you lost that thing?

Your life would no longer be worth living. What is that one thing? And I don't mean you just be sad without it. I just mean that all meaning and purpose and sense of of of vitality would be stripped from you and you didn't want to go on. What's that one thing in your life? Because if you find that thing, that's your king.

That's your king. That's where you're putting your hope, that's where you're putting all your trust. And if it's anything other than Jesus, it will promise you it will lie to you and promise you freedom. And ultimately, it will just consume you. It will ask for more and more and never deliver until you find yourself in your version of that bathroom.

I promise you, I've been there so many times.

Here, this true freedom does not come from the absence of a king. True freedom comes from the presence of the right king. Who is the right king in your life. So, we have that first question. Are you not the king? Yes. Jesus. God. But the second question we need to see in this passage is the one that the other criminal who was hanging on the cross said to his thief friend, he says, do you not fear God going back to our story?

So, Jesus, he's taken and he's crucified. Verse 32, two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And these guys were mentioned twice in a very short amount of time.

And that and that, which means that they were important. These criminals, like who were they? See, we know the Greek word here. When we talk about criminal, it's not implying that they were shoplifters. They weren't guys that were jaywalking or hit. Maybe, you know, you know, got the five-finger discount at the flea market. Most scholars agree that they were violent insurgents.

If they were rebels, that they were people that were in it to overthrow Rome. They had spent their lives fighting for their king, their way and their timing, and it has now come to an end.

Both equally guilty, both equally hopeless, both equally dying. But their responses are totally different. You have the one, the one criminal who is defiant, and he turns to Jesus and he asks the question and he's mocking him. He says, are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. Let me paraphrase when he say he's mocking Jesus. He's saying, prove who you are by giving me what I want, and then I'll believe in you.

Give me what I want and I'll follow you.

But the other rebuked him, saying, do you not fear God? You're under the same sentence of condemnation, and we deserve this. We did the thing they said we did, and we deserve the punishment we're getting. He didn't do a thing. Jesus did nothing. And he said to Jesus, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

See, when the second criminal says, do you not fear God? It means this moment is that fear is like terror. Are you not huddled in some corner, you know, shaking and in an absolute distress? Fear means he's seeing himself clearly and he's seeing God for who he is, and he's seeing himself for who he is. This person on the cross is this criminal.

What he's seeing in this moment is he sees that he deserves this. There's no excuse. He's not justifying. He's not rationalizing it. He's not offering these excuses. Well, yeah, if you had only seen and you would only know. You see, what happened was. No, it's repentance, I did it, I deserve it. And in his repentance, grace crashes in.

And not only can he see himself for what he is, it frees him to see Jesus for what he is. And that moment he sees this is a man who has done nothing. In the moment where Jesus's kingship was the most hidden, Jesus's kingship was the most disguised. As he hung on the cross, God opens this man's eyes to see who Jesus truly was.

And that moment, it was when this rebel brings the only offering fit for a king who is willing to hang on a cross for sinners. What does that offering his need, his emptiness, his failures, his inability, his lack of another option, his complete bankruptcy, his regret, his loss, his miscalculations, his sin and the fruit of it. In that moment, Jesus said to him, today you will be with me in Paradise.

As powerful in it. I want so badly to identify with the humble thief. I want my heart to be like that. But I got to tell you something. When I listen to myself, I'm more like the first guy.

If you're honest, you are too. We spend our days. I'll say, Jesus, I'll follow you. But you kind of give me what I want. I'll go this way as long as it unfolds this way and that way. Jesus, I'll do this thing. And if you do this, it'll be my proof that you got my best interests in mind.

And that I will follow you if you just do it the way I want my King, my way, my timing. Until then, my money is going to be on the throne. Until then, my pride is going to be on the throne. My ego is going to be on the throne. My public image is going to be on the throne.

My marriage will be on the throne, or the my well-being of my children will be on the throne. My career will be on the throne. But if you just kind of make it unfold this way, I'll follow you.

The good news for me and for you so you can resonate with that, is that Jesus came for hard hearted rebels. He did. He came for the slippery. He came for the self-righteous. Came for people who kneel before caricatures of Hell's Angels only to find themselves lost in bathrooms. He came for people who want to build, who are more concerned about what they look to the outside than the inside.

The more concerned about my Instagram profile telegraphs to the world than what I really am. Jesus came for those people and don't miss this.

The beauty of that second criminal on the cross, the beauty of him, wasn't that he didn't contend with those things, wasn't it? He didn't contend with pride or his own version of the throne, or what he wanted on the throne. The beauty of the second criminal was that he just admitted that he did. He just told the truth about it.

You're right. I deserve this. I deserve everything that's coming my way. I'm everything you think I am. And worse.

The truth of who he was and what he deserve. He confessed it. He confessed. It is his hard heartedness. And he fell on the mercy of Jesus. And in that moment Jesus said to him, truly, truly, I say to you today you will. You will be with me in Paradise. And I want you to imagine the scene through all a recorded history.

The angels have waited for the culmination of the promise, the law and the prophets, the the manifestation of the lambs of God and all the sacrifices in the temple. And finally, Jesus is born. He lived the perfect life. He's crucified on the cross. He's resurrected, and he steps through the gates of heaven, the culmination of history. And who's the first guy through the gates to follow him?

Who's the first guy that he rescued? This criminal. He said, I ain't got nothing.

It's all true about me. And even worse. But I'm with him and I'm with him, and he leads him into glory. By God's grace. I can do that. Yeah, by God's grace, I can say, Lord, I. Yeah, I'm all that. I'm even worse. I'm even worse. So can you. I just want to be clear. This is this is not an exercise in just how we become Christians.

This is an exercise in how do we walk as Christians every day. Because I can tell you this, my day I spend is I just alternate between which thief on the cross. I am proud and I won't admit it, and I'm mocking and then I'm. I'm humble and I get it. Lord, do you not fear God, I deserve this punishment.

He doesn't. But he took the punishment I deserved. So he give me a reward that only he deserved. Forgive me Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And there the Holy Spirit falls, and he meets me, and he confirms to my heart, one day you will come, and you will be with me in Paradise. Amen.