

Let's start with some historical context. The year is 1925. Europe is still recovering from WWI, the war to end all wars. Mussolini has ruled Italy for the past three years with an iron fist of brutal and frightening fascist violence. Adolf Hitler has recently been released from jail and is gaining strength and popularity with audacious rhetoric and violence, as his Nazi thugs foster racial hatred and intimidation... largely by exploiting the fear and hopelessness of a terrible world-wide economic depression. Nations & culture, spinning out of control toward crisis & chaos. Many of the Christian churches are in steep decline, and are largely unwilling or unable to address the relevant issues of the day in a meaningful way. Into that world, headed toward violent chaos and aggression, and to a discouraged church that had lost its way, Pope Pius XI of Rome wrote and released an encyclical: "Quas Primas" on December 11, 1925

... these manifold evils in the world are due to the fact that the majority of men have thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these have no place either in private affairs or in politics: and that as long as individuals and states refuse to submit to the rule of our Savior, there will be no real or hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations."

In that papal encyclical, made the uncompromising assertion,

<sup>1</sup> that God does still reign above all else, no matter what the world around us is doing or saying.

<sup>2</sup> and that our problems stem from having rejected God's truth, from allowing things other than Christ to rule in our lives.

In Quas Primas, the pope designated the Sunday proceeding Advent be celebrated as, 'the Feast of Christ the King Sunday, which was later adopted by many of the Protestant denominations, and it has been on the Presbyterian calendar since then. Christ is King – and our God does still rule and reign forever not the seemingly powerful forces that frighten and threaten - not the corruptions against which we feel so powerless nor even the terror and hatred of fascist dictators. Christ is still King, though nations' leaders, or even the church of Jesus Christ may choose to forget, trivialize or ignore that truth. The Lord is absolute sovereign, God will accomplish every promise, and will surely fulfill the Lord's will, salvation and purpose. The Church of 1925 and 2016 both need to be shaken and awakened, reminded that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and that we have been commissioned to transform our world and that the promise is true and sure and trustworthy... just as Jesus said:

Matthew 28:18-20

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The celebration of Christ the King, urges us to remember who we are and to remember whose we are... and that though increasingly, our world and our culture may reject or ignore the truth and message of Christ, yet Christ does rule, God's purpose shall prevail... for God is more powerful & sure than all the other forces around us and we must not be passive, compromise or surrender in fear to the forces of our world and culture that we know are wrong and that promote a life that is less than God's will & call. The thing that most fascinates me about Christ the King Sunday, even more than the historical context, is the particular Scripture passage chosen for this day. We might expect it to be a powerful miracle story that reveals the awesome power and glory of the Lord, but instead, it describes the scene at the crucifixion. All four Gospel writers make it very clear that Jesus was not a hapless victim of violence and injustice, but that despite the cruel brutality of crucifixion, it is the scene of God's victory over sin and death, and that all was happening according to God's plan and purpose of gracious salvation. In Luke, the irony is unmistakable, of religious leaders, the soldiers and one of the criminals mocking Jesus, as the Messiah and King of the Jews, and also mockingly calling on Jesus to save himself, while he was providing the gift of gracious salvation to all who would ever call on the name of the Lord. Unintentionally, they were correct in identifying who Jesus really was and what he came to accomplish.

Many of us wear a cross or have one hanging in our home. But the truth is, though we often see the cross beautifully decorated as art, crucifixion is still the most vicious and agonizing method for torturing and killing someone ever devised... an instrument of unimaginable suffering and unspeakable agony. And I have often wondered, why did Jesus have to die in such a gruesome and vicious way? ... couldn't he have died for our sins using a less horrible and sadistic method? Surprisingly enough, amid all my commentaries and theology books, that question of why crucifixion isn't really addressed, at least not to my satisfaction, so here's what I think. First, the horror and the gruesome ugliness of crucifixion forces me to see and confront the true depravity of my sin and when I refuse to love and forgive as Jesus commands... and the very messiness and brutal suffering of Jesus on the

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cross require me to acknowledge the extreme price Jesus paid for my pardon and how very much my salvation really cost. The costliness of God's grace and my salvation reminds me that I cannot save myself by doing a little tinkering here and there, by being a little more obedient and disciplined in my faith, or a bit more regular and useful serving around the church. The crucifixion is a most powerful sign of God's steadfast mercy, that Jesus died for us all, everybody undeserving though we are. And when I do begin to comprehend and appreciate more fully the cruelty of Christ's crucifixion for what it really is, and not the artist's jewel encrusted cross of beauty, I can also see the immeasurable gracious love of God in Christ, to sacrifice and suffer so much for me and for my salvation, and I am reminded that despite outward appearances, the reign of God will prevail. The scene of the crucifixion as Luke describes it includes another significant lesson and teaching.

We know that Jesus died for us all, and for us each as individual. That theology of "for everyone and for each one in particular" is demonstrated by Jesus being there suffering on that cross, when he spoke to save a particular criminal, there, then, on a cross, dying there beside him. Perhaps another reason that Jesus endured the gruesome and brutal violence of crucifixion was so that he would be there physically and be present in person to receive and accept that dying criminal's request, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Perhaps for the opportunity to save that one lost dying criminal, to save that one particular man hanging there, loved by God, Jesus willingly suffered and died to be present with him... just as Jesus willingly endures and suffers, to be present with each one of us... and God's presence with us always, is the power of grace and hope, even amid life's worst. So what does that mean, and why is that? Because that is the gracious and loving nature of our God, as it's described in the Deuteronomy passage.

### Deuteronomy 7:6

The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you.

The point? God's gracious love does not come as our own achievement, but is entirely God's choice, calling us his treasured possession, which is the most important truth there is or ever will be. That we are loved, no matter what. and because we did nothing to earn or deserve it, there is nothing we can ever do or say to lose it. - that God will never reject or abandon his treasured possession, which doesn't mean we won't ever struggle or suffer, but it means we'll never have to face it alone, because God is always with us to bring us through according to his gracious purpose and wisdom. And that point of Christ the King Sunday is that surely we need to hear and believe that truth again. I so need to receive that promise and truth once again today. We have all endured a truly terrible political campaign season, filled with lies, slander, fear-mongering, even violence-- it's been brutal and with no honor or integrity... I think, probably the worst, most vicious I've ever experienced.

All across the political spectrum weren't we all were eager for election day, for when the rancor and bitterness would finally end, and that maybe the polarizing hostility would be resolved. But judging from the media, from my Twitter and Facebook feeds, it's only gotten worse, even more fearful, vicious and nasty, as dishonest and horrible things being spoken & written, with no sense of fairness, honor or truthfulness. The election is finally over, the votes are all counted, but yet our nation remains deeply divided, many are afraid. It has never been made more clear that politics will never solve the problems we face. But as Christians we know one thing for certain. Hope is not lost! Christ is King! God has placed you and me in this place... at this cultural moment in history... to think clearly, speak boldly and act restoratively in our culture, to live out in the world, in our nation, community and home the love and welcome we have received from God in Christ.

Today, I need to be reminded one again, that Christ is King, that our God is never surprised, overwhelmed or befuddled, that the Lord will fulfill His saving purpose and promise, and our roots are planted in a much deeper truth than mere human political power. Christ is King, and so it is truly comforting and encouraging to know and to trust that whatever happens in this world, the word of God is clear and always reliable. As we read,

### Micah 6:8

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God... has chosen you ... to be his treasured possession... and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?