

# The Kind of King We Need

Hespeler, November 23, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Reign of Christ

Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, [Luke 23:33-43](#)

There is something strange that caught my eye in our reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke. It is a familiar enough passage – one that we have all read many times before. It is Luke's account of the crucifixion of Jesus. And as he is nailed to the cross, Jesus is repeatedly mocked, but he is mocked for one thing in particular.

## King and Messiah

The Jewish leaders mock him for claiming to be Messiah. Messiah is a word that means “anointed one.” And it was historically a word that Jews used to describe the king or some other person that God had appointed to lead or save the nation.

The Roman soldiers who are carrying out the execution don't understand the subtleties of Jewish concepts, so they just mock Jesus for claiming to be the King of the Jews, which means about the same thing. And the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, agrees because he has ordered that a mocking charge be posted above Jesus' head on the cross: **“This is the King of the Jews.”**

But that is not all. Even the criminal who has been crucified beside Jesus also mocks him with the same Jewish jibe that he has claimed to be the Messiah. Meanwhile, the one on the other side (perhaps because he is a Gentile) joins the Romans in assuming that Jesus has claimed to be a king. But he accepts this claim and assumes that Jesus is about to come into his own kingdom.

It is not surprising, of course, that all of these people have heard the rumour that Jesus has made such a claim. That particular idea about him seems to have spread widely.

## Assumption About Kingship

So, I get that they want to make fun of Jesus for claiming to be a king. What is somewhat odd, however, is that they all make the same assumption about what that means. They all know what makes a king a king. They know what a king or a Messiah's first job is. And their reason for thinking that Jesus is a failure is that he had not done that one thing.

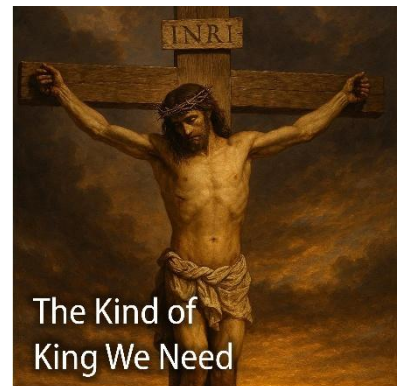
So, what is that one thing? What has Jesus failed to do? Has he failed to establish an effective bureaucracy? Is the problem that he has not managed to pass any legislation? Has there been some public relations gaffe?

No, it is none of that. They know he is not a good king because he has failed at the number one priority of a ruler. He has not saved himself.

## Priorities of Leaders

And it made me wonder. Is that really true? Is that what leaders are supposed to prioritize? Are they supposed to make sure to cover their own... back first and everything else comes after that?

So, I looked around at what leaders do today. And guess what, it turns out that the Jewish leaders, the Romans and the first criminal were right. The evidence is clear. The first job of a leader is to save themselves.



We see it in Ottawa these days. Our country is led by a minority government at the moment. And minority governments can fall at just about any moment, and the people in charge could cease to be leaders.

## Primary Motivation

That's why it seems as if everything the government does these days is motivated by one of two things. Either the government wants to avoid an election that they might not win, or it wants to make sure that any election it goes into will create a majority, which will mean that their position is safe for a long time.

And it seems to me that everything they do – every budget and piece of legislation is undertaken with that calculus. Sure, they hope that these things might do good for the country. Maybe some of it even does. But all of that takes a back seat to the number one priority – to save their own skin.

## Across All Parties

I do not say this as a particular criticism of the ruling party. I know that any other party in the same position would do the same thing. It is how the system works. It is set up so that all who aspire to be leaders will always seek to save themselves first. And the justification often goes like this: if we are not in charge, we can't save the country. So, we have to save ourselves first; everything else comes after that.

As is often the case, much of this is seen even more starkly in the United States right now. You may wonder sometimes why Republicans these days do not challenge their own president, even when they do not agree with his policies. So many of them have been so controversial that they cannot simply agree with all of them.

The reason they don't challenge him is because they know that if he wishes to, he can remove them from power by backing someone else against them in a primary election. They know that their first priority is to save their own jobs.

And the opposition party is no different. Every move they make seems to be calculated to save their own seats in Congress first.

## Mockers Seem to Be Right

So, I guess what I am saying is that, if we look at leadership and how it works in our world to this very day, the critics and mockers in our Gospel reading this morning are absolutely right. Jesus is a failure as king. He has proven it by failing to save himself.

And if we are going to buy into the way leadership works in our world, it seems that we need to join in the mockery. Let's point our fingers and laugh at Jesus, the worst king ever!

## Claiming Christ as King

Ah, but I know that you haven't come here to mock Jesus today. In fact, you are here on the day known as Christ the King Sunday – the day when the church has, for centuries, gathered to celebrate the kingship of Christ and to pray for his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Perhaps, if we want to claim Christ as our king, it is time for us to embrace a new understanding of what it means to be a leader.

## Learning from Jesus

I realize that our political leadership is not listening in today. Our renewed understanding of leadership may not change what happens in the parliaments, congresses and legislatures of the world today, but perhaps if we start following the example of Jesus in our lives and in our churches, something new could spread from there.

So what can we learn from Jesus in this passage that may give us a new perspective on leadership today? What traits do we see in him that may help us to understand how his failure to save himself is the essence of true leadership?

## Forgiveness

Well, the first thing that stands out to me as I read this story is this. His immediate response, even as he is crucified, is to say **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”** instead of concentrating on saving himself.

Now, the very idea of forgiving your opponents – especially when they are in the process of attacking you – is something that seems unthinkable to modern leaders. Instead, we see the opposite. Your critics attack you, what do you do? You double down. If your political enemies make some mistake or gaffe, you are absolutely going to capitalize on that.

You will mock them relentlessly, but you will never ever forgive them. But Jesus does. What does that teach us? It teaches us that resentment and holding on to grievances against your political enemies does have power. But it is mostly a power to prevent true leadership.

## How Lack of Forgiveness Affects Us

In fact, it tends to mean that we get stuck. The fact that so much of our politics today is bogged down in endless studies and negotiations and produces so little change for the better, probably has a great deal to do with how hard our leaders cling to their grievances and enmities.

But the power that Jesus unleashes here – the power of forgiveness – always opens up new possibilities. Here, on the cross, Jesus creates a whole new reality with the forgiveness of his enemies. It is the new reality of the kingdom of God; it will transform the world.

I would encourage you to embrace this power of forgiveness. As you let go of whatever resentments you have been carrying, you may find yourself becoming unstuck. You may find yourself set free to embrace change and new beginnings. That is the kind of leadership that Jesus demonstrates to us on the cross.

## Service

Beyond forgiving his enemies, Jesus does something else that is supremely unleaderlike. He serves. Far from saving himself, he literally sacrifices himself before their eyes. That is something that we see rarely in a leader in our age.

We’ve already discussed how leaders seek to save themselves first. But let’s pause for a moment to consider why they seek to save themselves. It is often not the reason that they tell themselves – that they have to remain in charge in order to do the good that no one else will do.

## Knowing Our Worth

Usually, the reason has much more to do with the fact that they begin to associate their worth and their identity with the power that they wield. To let go of it is to let go of everything that makes them them. So, they refuse to let go.

But Jesus can do that because he knows his worth. He knows who he is better than anyone who has ever lived. That is precisely why he can give himself up when the time comes.

And that is true strength. Those who cling to their power or position because they need it to feel right about themselves are the ones who are displaying a deep weakness.

The strength that Jesus shows in this is something that all of us can tap into. For we have an identity that no one can take away from us. We are children of God, and we have worth that we carry with us precisely because of what Jesus has done for us in this very scene.

That is why you don't need power or position to matter. And ironically enough, that is the very thing that can make you a good leader. We need the kind of leaders who are confident enough in themselves to put the good of the people or of the church or the institution first, before their desire to keep their position.

## Confidence in the Future

And finally, the thing that makes Jesus the kind of king we need is that he can look to the future with hope and confidence. When the criminal on one side of him is the only one to defend Jesus against his mockers, and declares that he has done nothing wrong, he turns to Jesus with a request: **"Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom."**

And Jesus doesn't hesitate. He doesn't get caught up in the questions that might weigh us down. He doesn't seek to define the kingdom and when it will come. He doesn't worry about that even though he himself has said, **"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father."** Mark 13:32

None of those details worry Jesus because he knows the future is firmly in God's hands. He doesn't need to control it or even understand it personally. So he can reply to the man, **"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."**

True leaders don't need to control everything and everyone to feel secure. They know the power that is found in placing trust – trust in God and trust in others. We need leaders like that.

## Jesus, King of This World

Jesus is the king who brings us to the reality of the kingdom of God. It is not just an otherworldly reality like the one that the criminal on the cross went to that very day. The kingship of Jesus is meant to teach us all how leadership can better work in this world.

I hope that we can all take his lessons of forgiveness, self-sacrifice and hope to heart. If we can embrace that sort of leadership, it can really be the start of new possibilities for our church and far beyond our walls.