

Luke 23:27-43 – Last Sunday of the Church Year – Weep For Yourselves – November 23, 2025
+In Nomine Iesu+

Somebody, it would seem, messed things up today. Perhaps you noticed. The Gospel reading we heard seems better suited for Good Friday—April 3rd—rather than today, the Last Sunday of the Church Year—November 23rd. We even have a couple of Lenten hymns today.

This year we have focused on Luke’s Gospel. This is year C in our three-year lectionary. And this word of doom and the cross in Luke 23 is where we end our time with Luke as our central Gospel. I know a few pastors who changed this reading today—to make it fit a little better.

The Last Sunday of the Church Year is usually reserved to focus on the final Advent of our King—the last day—the return of Christ. This is Christ the King Sunday. It will be our last Sunday with green paraments for a while. Everything goes blue next week. The new year on the Church calendar begins with Advent and we start the cycle all over again—this time in Matthew.

The Church year causes us to orient ourselves around the life of Christ. Soon, in Advent, we join with the saints of the Old Testament—and anticipate the coming of Christ. Our eyes begin to turn to Bethlehem. John the Baptist prepares the way for the coming Christ. Jesus comes to save us.

We are getting ready during Advent—but with contemplation and subdued joy—with a blue note. And when Christmas arrives, we celebrate the incarnation of God—the beginning of Christ’s work as the God-Man—as He takes on humanity to reconcile us humans to God.

But we won’t replace our readings today. This particular reading in Luke 23—the crucifixion—just might be what we need—as we finish our Church year. And so, I want to talk a little about Christ as King—from this reading—and from two perspectives. This is an important theological distinction. We see Jesus—we look at theology—*from below*—and *from above*. And we will look to all three readings today to help us.

The sign on the cross is just perfect. This is the King of the Jews. And we are left to figure out what to do with that. And the two thieves are very helpful. Here is Jesus being crucified. Betrayed by his friend. Deserted by the disciples. Pilate gives into the pressures of the crowd. And Jesus is walking up the hill saying, “If they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

It seems Jesus is quite out of control. The world is out of control. The Jews reject Him. The Romans crucify Him. And He finds Himself, hanging there to die, between these two thieves. It is a pretty awful scene—especially if you don’t know what is going on.

Much is said about this moment earlier in Luke. In Luke 2, Simeon says to Mary of her Child, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” Mary will find herself at the cross. This is what Simeon is talking about.

And Jesus Himself predicted this moment. Back in Luke 9, Jesus says, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes,

and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” But the disciples didn’t get it—nobody does—not yet.

Beyond the claims of His death, Jesus tells us why. In John 3, He says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

And so, Jesus presents Himself as the suffering Servant of Isaiah. And yet there are His other claims concerning His identity. Just a few pages back in our Bibles, Jesus told the religious leaders, “From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” He is a King and He claims His throne.

The thieves seem to know something. Maybe they have simply heard the taunts of the rulers, the soldiers, the crowd. Maybe they just read the sign. Jesus is the Christ—He is the Chosen One. He is the King of the Jews. But it sure doesn’t look like it.

The thieves have every reason to doubt—unless this is what the King meant to do. It might seem odd. It might seem upside down. What if the cross is His purpose? What if it is necessary? What if it was a place of exaltation? A throne?

Now, the whole story is rather shocking when we start getting specific. God takes on human flesh. He is raised in an insignificant little backwater town of Nazareth. He teaches and offends His hearers. He performs miracles and the religious leaders accuse Him of something diabolical.

And here He is with a thief on His right and a thief on His left, all hanging on crosses to die. This is not what you would expect from God. This is not what you would expect from the one true King.

Unless it is. Remember, He predicted all of this. He planned all of this. He is the one slain from the foundation of the world. This is selflessness. This is self-sacrifice. This is love. This is God giving us what we most need at great personal cost.

God takes righteousness and justice and holiness very seriously. And He is right to do so. And since we are not righteous—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God—since sinful people cannot live in the midst of a perfect God—He has to find another way for us to be reconciled to Himself. And this is it.

It may not look like this is what is going on—but here on the cross, as Jesus is lifted up before the world—He draws us all to Himself. The cross is humiliation. And the cross is exaltation. All at once. And here on the cross, Jesus is exalted as King of the Jews—the King of the whole universe.

The question is, do the thieves have eyes to see what is going on? Do we have eyes to see? The cross is not what it appears to be. It seems to be a symbol of rejection—where criminals are executed—where justice is carried out. It is not where you would expect to find God. And yet, here He is.

A Roman Centurion got it. After Jesus dies and before the resurrection, just a few verses later in our reading, he praises God and says, “Certainly this man was innocent.” In Matthew he says, “Truly this was the Son of God.”

And one of the thieves, miraculously, can also see Jesus as King, even in this terribly unlikely place. The other thief still mocks. And it makes sense. He just can’t see it.

But the believing thief says these shocking words to Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The man had merely been listening to what Jesus said that day—to Jesus’ seven words from the cross. The man didn’t ask Jesus into his heart. The Spirit regenerates his heart. And he responds with repentance and his faith. And Jesus says “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Jesus welcomes this sinner into His Kingdom. And these thieves give the most concrete example of what Malachi says, “Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.” The question for us is this, what will you do with Jesus? What will you do with the cross? Which thief are you?

That is our theology of the cross from below. That is the picture of Jesus we get in the Gospels. But God has more to say to us. And here we want to turn to our Epistle reading just briefly. Jesus in Colossians, is presented as a theology from above.

And really, it starts and ends with all of the things we have been talking about today—kingship and cross. Paul tells us what the story in Luke means, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins...making peace by the blood of his cross.”

The experts have written a great deal about this passage. Is this a poem, a hymn, a confession of sin? Did Paul use an existing piece of literature? These are difficult questions to answer. And I will save you from digging into them today. What matters is that it is all about Christ from a heavenly perspective.

John does something similar with the symbolic and picturesque picture of Jesus we get in Revelation. We know this passage well, “The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’”

This is the same Jesus that thief on the cross looked to in faith, now fully exalted, at the right hand of the Father. And, returning to Paul, Jesus is exalted above all things. He is the Creator of all things. He sustains our world. All things—all people—were created for Him—to serve Him. He is the image of God—the icon of God. If we want to know what God is like, look at the words and work of Jesus. He is God.

The cross is not the end of the story, He is the first to experience the resurrection, right in the middle of human history. He ascends to the right hand of the Father. He is glorious restored to the right hand of the Father. He is the head of the Church. He is our authority. He is our Lord. And He is the heavenly King.

And this is more than just a theological statement about Him. It is a call to faith. We can trust Him because of who He is—because of what He has done—and what He will do—the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. And He is coming again. As He

ascended into heaven, He will return on the clouds of glory. Every eye will see Him. And we will spend a little time with this idea next week.

The question is how we will greet Him? Which thief will we be that day? And it a question worth some thought. I think many people today live as if Jesus doesn't exist—as if He isn't who He claimed to be—as if He didn't matter very much. We don't really give thought to Jesus. We don't talk about Him. And truly, we do talk about those things that really matter to us.

Jesus is King right now—over everything—over us. I realize that in some ways His reign and His kingdom are hidden. The cross was two thousand years ago—and we are only interested in what happened fifteen minutes ago.

We don't know the time of His return—only that it will be soon—although this means God's version of *soon*. It feels a long way off. We often can't see His reign. We see some of the signs of the times that Jesus warns us about. We even wonder about the concerns that come up in our Malachi reading, seeing injustice and the arrogance of those who perpetrate it.

But let me call you to think of the current reign of Christ in ways reminiscent of the cross—a theology from below. It is no less important. Don't worry, He is coming back in all the glory and power of Paul or John's perspective. He even exists in that reality now.

But for us, things look more like the cross. It may be hard to see the reign of God. But don't let that get in the way of your faith. And don't let that keep you from loving the kingdom of God. Trust the story. Trust the theology from below, even as you hope for the theology from above.

Right now, the kingdom tastes like bread and wine. It feels like cool baptismal water. It sounds like the Word of God read and preached and taken to heart. It looks like changing paraments and seasons of the Church year—focusing our schedules on Jesus. It feels like another quiet contemplative morning with your Bible and a cup of coffee.

It is God patiently calling you to turn from sin—looking to that cross as the place of your salvation—and then taking up your cross and following in His way. Now is the time for salvation. Now is the time to kneel before His throne.

Jesus is King. It may not seem like it. But when you look at things deeply—when you know the story—all things point to that reality. And we will all see for ourselves one day—one way or another. Be ready for that day. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+