



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS  
THE FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING, NOVEMBER 24, 2019  
JEREMIAH 23:1-6; PSALM 46; COLOSSIANS 1:11-20; LUKE 23:33-43

## WHO'S YOUR KING?

*Luke 23:33-43 [When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."]*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."]*

I was in Tucson, Arizona at the Border Ministries Summit on Wednesday when we got word of the acquittal. It was his second trial. The first had ended in a mistrial, but the prosecution pushed hard, changed the parameters. This was to be a landmark case for them. In OUR name, and not for the first time, our government was trying to make it a crime to give food and water to people.

But in this second trial, Scott Warren, a volunteer for the humanitarian organization

No More Deaths, was acquitted, and the courtroom erupted in emotion. His attorneys had argued that he was motivated solely by his humanitarian principles to "prevent suffering and death" in the Arizona desert. Warren himself said, "The government failed in its attempt to criminalize basic human kindness." His lawyer said, "Scott Warren did what all of us should aspire to do: he risked his freedom, he risked his livelihood, and he

risked his future. All in order to help strangers in distress.”<sup>1</sup>

I got back last night after spending three days with people who are giving their all to help strangers in distress at our southern border – church people, doing what they do in the name of Jesus. Because where else is our allegiance to be, as Christians?

A speaker at the Border Summit said, “At the most fundamental level, Scott Warren is ALL OF US.” US: every person who is following Jesus and trying to care for those in need at every kind of barrier and border, while the forces of Empire are trying their damndest to make that a crime, and worse, to make it fail. As a *deterrent*.

So I ask you, as I ask myself: Who **is** OUR king? Caesar? Or Jesus? And what are we willing to put on the line for that allegiance?

Because Caesar’s empire sends OUR king to the cross. As a *deterrent*.

And yet today, with this troubling Gospel for a such-named feast day, we celebrate Christ the **King**. And we’ve got choices to make. Is Christ OUR king – or not?

Because I just watched a hand-held video of law enforcement pouring out and kicking

over water jugs in the desert – jeering at the people who brought them there. **Of COURSE that’s not all border law enforcement.** But I can still see that man’s face, his glee and taunting as he poured, and I can still see the force of hate in the booted foot of the woman who sent that gift of life flying and splatting out into the sand. Unleashed by, in the name of, Empire.

Where is *our* King? Kicking over the water, or walking with the desperate, thirsty, dying people? We know the answer to that.

Do you think this is being political? Well, our Feast of Christ the King is a relatively modern invention – 1925 – *directly* responding to the rise of the dictatorships of Europe and the growing secularism and nationalism around the world – to say that OUR king stands for a different kind of power. Pope Pius XI wrote in his encyclical where Christ the King was instituted: “the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics.” He wanted to affirm how Christ is, and is to be our one King, reigning in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carranza, Rafael. “Jury acquits Arizona border aid volunteer Scott Warren of harboring charges.” *AZCentral*. November 20, 2019. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/border-issues/2019/11/20/arizona-border-aid-volunteer-scott-warren-acquitted/4254987002/>

<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius XI. Papal Encyclical *Quas Primas*, 33. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_11121925\\_quas-primas.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html)

This is particularly, and sadly, prescient for our time, as well – that nearly a century ago a pope called out the perversion of the world that was – and is – increasingly telling Christians that we must compartmentalize our religion and give our highest allegiance to the government.

And so, in our Gospel, on the Feast of Christ the King, OUR king hangs on a cross, beside **every** suffering human. And he says, “Today you will be with **me** in paradise.” Hear how today’s Gospel hinges on one sentence spoken to a criminal at Jesus’ side! The King of life hangs on the cross – defeated in *earthly* eyes. But with extraordinary grace and forgiveness, he speaks directly to one suffering person, a criminal no less – the only person he addresses directly from the cross in this Gospel – and Jesus has the compassion and *kingly* AUTHORITY to say, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.”

Today you will be with **me**. Could there be more blessed words?

The reign of Christ is not a death-dealing system intent on punishment and exclusion, but a paradise of inclusion and forgiveness, even to a convicted criminal, someone we may not think deserved it. And more, Jesus is not just blessing this one man! Don’t just zero

in on this type figure of “the good thief.” Doing that, we gloss over what Jesus already had said: “Father, forgive **them**; **they** don’t know what they’re doing.” Jesus asks forgiveness for all of them: the taunters, the soldiers, the weeping, the cowards, “the bad thief,” ALL of them, all of US. You and me. THAT is our King, whose power is forgiveness, love, and inclusion. Who suffers for us and with us. And in doing so, saves us. Social justice author and advocate Fr. Walter Burghardt wrote: Luke’s story that we call *the good thief* “summarizes with startling vividness what the son of God took our flesh to effect. It tells us what Calvary did for **all** of us by narrating what Calvary did for **one** of us....”<sup>3</sup>

We have a mighty God who faced loss and humiliation and betrayal and torture and ignominious death, to show us that what is truly important is **different** now, in his inbreaking new Kingdom! It is not being the mighty emperor, nor the highest priest, nor the one at the place of honor at the table, nor the one with ritual cleanliness under myriad laws with strict borders. It is being beside one another, the way Jesus came beside us.

When he turns to the desperate man at his side, Jesus doesn’t say, “What was your

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<sup>3</sup> Burghardt, Walter. *Love is a Flame of the Lord: More Homilies on the Just Word*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995. p. 23.

crime?” He doesn’t say, “Are you sufficiently sorry?” He doesn’t say, “Why should I help you?” In the face of death, he proclaims his full stature as the King of Life and says, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Caesar can’t say that.

Jesus does not take himself off the cross to save himself. He stayed there in love, to forgive us, and save us, and to be with us in this suffering world as it takes three steps forward and two steps back into his new

Kingdom, a kingdom that isn’t a bordered empire, but is the paradise for all of us.

In the midst of all the chaos and suffering that is going on in the world, Jesus is with you, and with me. *How else could we still be standing?* And if we’re still standing, we need to not be deterred to stand beside each other, especially the neediest who are suffering among us, and live into our claim – and our duty – as citizens of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Where *all* are welcome.



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