

THE POWER THAT SAVES US

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

Exeter Cathedral

23 November 2025

The taunting is telling. The taunting of Jesus tells us a great deal. 'Let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one.' 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.' 'Are you not the Messiah? Then save yourself.' The logic here is that if someone has power, if they are a king, they will use that power for their own benefit. That's the point of power. And since this pathetic man on the cross is not using power in that way, he must not be a king. He must not have enough power.

And yet, Jesus is on that cross, in that moment, with a criminal on either side of him, exercising a different kind of power – he is quietly demonstrating an otherworldly power, a power that seems alien to us. But it is the power that saves us.

As the leaders scoff him, and the soldiers mock him and a criminal to his side derides him, Jesus prays for them all. He pleads with God to forgive them. His concern is not for himself in that moment. His concern is for those for whom he has gained compassion, for those whose lives and beliefs have led them to a place called the Skull, where they have chosen to crucify and ridicule an innocent man whose crime is to love as God would have us love. We mock this man. Because he chooses not to save himself, we conclude he does not have the power to save himself. And so we fail to see that we are the ones in need of saving.

For the Day That's in It

I've lived in Ireland now for the last 8 years, and 15 of the last 20 – but there are still many things that baffle me about the place and the people. One of them is the expression 'for the day that's in it'. For the day that's in it. The Irish will use this for something happening at a particularly appropriate time. They'll put on green on St. Patrick's Day and say 'for the day that's in it'. Or choose a Guinness when Ireland is playing England and say 'for the day that's in it'. Or announce that they're going for a walk when the sun has come out 'for the day that's in it'. I'm always a little thrown when I hear it because I immediately ask: aren't we in the day? – how can the day be in anything? But I gather it's a translation of the Irish: 'that's what the day is for.'

And it strikes me being in Exeter this very weekend and given the text from *Luke* for this morning, that it is absolutely fitting to be marking Christ the King Sunday with you. This is a message we probably need to hear. This is a reminder we are due. It is more than appropriate for us to be reflecting today on what it actually means for Christ to be King – and for power to be associated not with one's ability to save oneself or one's own but with the concern we have for the other, our love for the other – the power to care even for those who would do you harm.

So: for the day that's in it. This happens to be the 100th marking of Christ the King Sunday. This feast day, tucked in at the end of the church calendar year and forgotten by almost everyone who doesn't like to wear clerical robes, was dreamed up in the aftermath of the First World War when church leaders were growing concerned by the rise of ethnonationalism across Europe. Nations were in a bit of an identity crisis at the time. Empires had fallen. Power was up for grabs. Secularism was on the rise. And the Church wanted to remind the world and itself who actually was in charge – and what our ultimate example of power should be.

And so it's important to note that yesterday there was a British Unity Walk here in these streets – and an even larger counter protest march. As compared to the last time I was in Exeter, I am struck by how many more St. George's flags and Union flags I see. The southwest of England is looking more and more like Northern Ireland. The ethnonationalism that alarmed

folks 100 years ago is very much still with us; hence the need to remember that Christ is King and what that means. For the day that's in it.

Father, Forgive

I'm in Exeter today because this year is Corrymeela's 60th anniversary and a group here who has been supporting our work invited us to come and give an update on what we've been doing. Corrymeela exists because in a deeply divided society like our own it is crucial to be able to gather diverse people together into experiences of genuine community – where we begin to understand each other better and trust each other more. We believe that such work lies at the heart of the Gospel – and that it quietly demonstrates an otherworldly power to think not only of oneself or one's own, but to consider the needs even of those who might harm you, to be open to learning that we are not all that different to the ones we call other. That has been our lesson from 60 years in the divided and traumatised context of Northern Ireland – and it continues to be the challenge of the age we are in.

I am glad to know that the protests yesterday were largely peaceful and personally I am pleased that while only 150 people came out for the British Unity Walk, an estimated 800 came out in a counterdemonstration to declare Exeter is for Everyone. More people were wanting to show compassion and empathy for those who have been made to feel unwelcome. And yet I am concerned that the 800 standing in solidarity with some are no closer to understanding the fears and desperation of the 150 and the many more who are motivated to come out against immigration or to explore the power of ethnonationalism in 2025. How do we stand up for those who need protection without pushing others away who may also need protection? How do we remember that while people will do monstrous things, no one is born a monster – and that if we had experienced what others have experienced or become as fearful and desperate as they have become, we would be just as likely to do what we oppose.

Protests and marches have their place; but so do quiet conversations and shared experiences with people we pretend already to know but don't yet understand. Using power to save ourselves and those we love may be necessary at times, but what is truly holy and divine and Christ-like is the power that can actually save us: the power of empathy for those we want to reject, the ones we cannot understand, the ones we fear could harm us. It is the power to imagine what it must be like to be where they are and to love what they fear they will lose.

Our Salvation

And so: the taunting is telling. Our taunting tells us a great deal. If we ever find ourselves revelling in the comeuppance of others, if we find ourselves enjoying the misfortunes of political opponents, the fall of those who have abused power, we ourselves might be worshipping a very earthly form of power, serving a very common type of king: one of vengeance and vindication and violence and victory over others.

But then we will find ourselves hanging on a cross at the side of Jesus, hearing him pray: 'Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.' And then we may scoff and mock him and deride this idea of a king, and say: 'Are you not the Messiah? Are you not God? Do you not have any actual power? Then save yourself and us!'

Or, by grace, we may be able to participate in our own salvation and imagine something greater. We might come to the realisation that we are no better than those we would condemn. An turn then to Jesus knowing that his is the power that saves us. 'Jesus, Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.' We have been rightly condemned, for we are getting what we deserve.

But this man, this man has done nothing wrong. And died that we might truly be with him today in paradise, a paradise created by our compassion – not just for some but for all.

In the name of the Creator and the Christ and Holy Spirit, one God: Amen.