

Praise and Glory to Christ our King!

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Christ the King Sunday C – Jrm 23.1f, Song Zech (Lk 1.68f), Col 1.11f, Lk 23.33f

I wonder what you'd think about a king who goes about among his people disguised as an ordinary person. That's just what King Abdullah II of Jordan does. Every now and then in the Jordanian newspapers, a new article will pop-up to say that today, their carefully disguised king joined the queue at a taxation office or a hospital, or he spent the day driving a taxi. While he's in a queue or driving, he talks with people about how they're being treated; what sort of service they're getting. People confide in taxi drivers.

This is King Abdullah's way of finding out for himself what sort of experience his people have of his government. So people who work behind hospital desks and tax office front-counters must always wonder if the next face they see hidden behind the beard of a shabby old man might actually be that of their King. Maybe they behave now as if everyone is their king – just in case. Wouldn't that improve things!

King Abdullah does this because he cares for his people. He wants to find out what he needs to do to make life better for everyone. It's an unusual king who does something like that, and today is all about the King who's done this for all of us. The Servant King Jesus came in solidarity with people on the bottom rung, the ones he loves; to be one of us; to save us. No-one is beneath this King's notice!

Today, we're told about God's commitment to his little ones. In our reading from Jeremiah, we're told that bad shepherds will be dealt with, and God will take their place. Bad

shepherds wreck lives; they betray trust and fracture the community of God's people. They publicly disgrace the name of God. Jeremiah said this would change. *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, [who] shall reign as king and deal wisely, and [who] shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*

Jrm 23.5 So expectations were huge; people waited and hoped.

In our canticle this morning, Zechariah's Song, we sang with an old man who'd waited all his life for this prophecy to be fulfilled. His son, John, would finally get God's people ready for the coming of that righteous king. ^{Lk 1.17} Finally, Zechariah held his child in his arms: John the Baptist, harbinger of the Messiah. And Zechariah sang, *you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.* ^{Lk 1:76-77}

This is a glorious preparation. You expect so much; hope so deeply; all that cripples us will change. What a wonderful King this will be. But nothing prepares us for the moment of that King's revealing: the one we see today; our King, dying on the Cross. He didn't just come *disguised* as a vulnerable person like King Abdullah does; he actually *became* one. He didn't just come for a quick, harmless experience of people's inconvenience before being whisked off in a motorcade back to the palace. He suffered what oppressed people do; he died the way the most ill-treated victims of tyranny do; by government-sanctioned murder.

Jeremiah says God will demonstrate solidarity with such people by replacing bad shepherds with a good one. But then what? Even if you replace a bad shepherd, they leave such a terrible legacy: suffering, confusion, hopelessness, bitterness and betrayal – no clear sense of right and wrong any more. Jesus takes this terrible legacy to the Cross so it can die with him once and for all, and in its place he offers healing

forgiveness.

Before Jesus dies, leaders, soldiers, even one of the condemned hanging beside him—each taunt him with the same demand: *Save yourself!* But he's not in it for himself. He's not a false shepherd; not a false King. If there's a cost to be borne, *he* will bear it, because ultimately, he's the only one who really can. He doesn't save himself; he's determined to save us all. And as Zechariah sang, he does it through **forgiveness**.^{v. 77} He bears the cost himself – the spread of the disease stops with him.

Listen to Jesus, as much a victim of evil as anyone can be; listen, as he asks God to forgive his persecutors. *Father, forgive them; for they don't know what they're doing!* Suddenly, the legacy of pain and suffering, confusion and hopelessness, betrayal and bitterness, of no clear sense of right and wrong – suddenly that legacy, and even the power of death itself – all of it is defused. That King – not seated on a throne, but hanging before us on a senseless, violent instrument of tyranny – that King is both the good shepherd who has come to us, and the embodiment of the new realm where we now live forever.

The other criminal still asks him for a future hope: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.* What we witness here is the complete change from criminal to saint' what we call repentance. He names what he has been, renounces it and turns to Jesus. He calls on Jesus' name and asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom.

And Jesus replies that the Kingdom is here now: *Truly I tell you, **today** you will be with me in paradise.* Jesus receives him immediately – takes him at his word and receives him. *Today you will be with me in paradise; restored to everything you might have hoped to be.*

This is astonishing. The people Jesus keeps company with here

show that none of us should ever imagine ourselves beyond the reach of his love; no-one should ever imagine themselves as beneath the notice of Christ our crucified, servant King. And most astonishing of all, this is all here now – today – here amongst us and within each one of us. Praise and Glory to Christ our King! Amen