

Sermon for Christ the King Sunday, 23 November 2025

Focus texts: Jeremiah 23:1–6 & Luke 23:33–43

Season of Reconciliation – Theme: “*The Crisis of Belonging*”

Let us pray,

Sovereign God,
Hide me behind the cross of Christ,
that it is Jesus we see and hear-
the Shepherd who gathers,
the Saviour who remembers,
the Lord who reconciles all things.

In Christ’s holy name, we pray. **Amen**

Like every good preacher, I begin with a question: “How do we speak of reconciliation on a day when we mark Kingship and sovereignty?”

Seems a bit ironic, doesn’t it?

Well, it depends on who and what is being reconciled, held together with whose Kingdom it is and what that kingdom looks like and stands for.

Today, the Church catholic marks the final Sunday of our liturgical calendar, called the Feast of Christ the King. It’s the New Year’s Eve of the liturgical year and on this day we recall, sing and speak about the sovereignty of our God who reigns supreme over all things.

Now, I don’t know about you, but it doesn’t always look or feel like it to me.

The gospel reading set for today, doesn’t help either. It describes a 30something year old man from a region of a far-flung Roman outpost, who had leadership potential, who posed a threat to power, and was executed.

Doesn’t sound very sovereign to me. And I’ve come to understand that it’s not meant to!

I’ve never been at home with the idea of monarchy, and I often find myself instinctively cautious around language of kings and kingdoms. And yet, on my very first day in my role here, I stood and pledged allegiance to one. It’s a reminder to me that God is still shaping my understanding- still widening my imagination- of what Christ’s kingdom truly means. I know some prefer speech of the Kin-dom of God, or the Community of the Beloved, or the Inbreaking of Heaven. Wherever you land in the choice of language, this term “Christ the King”, invites imagination. Better yet, begs of us *prophetic imagination*: where you bring your thoughts about power, powerlessness, authority, leadership and vulnerability to the fore.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks into a world where leaders had forgotten their people. *Jeremiah 23:1 in my home-language of Afrikaans it sounds more pungent:-*

“Wee die herders wat die skape van my weiveld vernietig en verstrooi, sê die Here.”

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord” (verse 1). God’s judgement, we are reminded, is for those who refuse responsibility for those entrusted to their care, for leaders who *do not gather* but scatter, *who do not tend* but exploit. A word for those who lead in the church and are intent on harm or divisiveness. *I guess they would have chosen the alternate reading to preach on this morning.*

Jeremiah’s world is not so different from ours.

Today, people long for communities that see them, recognise them, and call them by name. Instead, many feel scattered: by political tribalism, by economic systems that value productivity over personhood, by churches that sometimes speak more about who is out than who is in.

My friends, We are in the midst of a crisis, ***a crisis of belonging!***

As we speak of belonging, we cannot ignore the suffering that cries out in our world today. This week marks the beginning of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, observed across the globe. And here in the UK- along with many of our neighbouring countries- the crisis is acute. Women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people continue to bear the brunt of an epidemic of brutality, fear, and silencing. I saw this on the faces of those who filled our Chapter House on Friday evening for the Trans Remembrance Day Vigil, many of them young people who were suspicious and even afraid to meet in a church, let alone a cathedral because they fear ridicule, judgement and ultimately their safety.

I spoke about the rising movement across South Africa, where in every major city are preparing to march, picket, or shut down their workplaces to decry gender-based and queer violence. According to recent data, over half of South African women (51 %) report having experienced gender-based violence, and in the year from April 2023 to March 2024, there were 42,569 reported rape cases. In that same year, 5,578 women were killed -a femicide rate many times higher than the global average. The scale of the pain is massive, and communities are calling on all institutions- including churches- to stand in solidarity, speak out, and act,

Here in the UK, the crisis of violence is just as real. According to the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales, some 8 percent of adults- roughly 3.9 million people-experienced domestic abuse over the past year. In the same period, over 140,000 hate crimes were reported to the police, including more than 22,000 motivated by sexual orientation and nearly 5,000 by transgender identity. These are not just numbers- they are lives.

It is impossible to talk about a crisis of belonging without naming that:

- There cannot be true belonging where bodies are unsafe.
- No reconciliation where people live in fear of those who should cherish and protect them.
- No Kingdom can come on earth as in heaven if patriarchy and bigotry rule in the streets, our home, or even in the Church.

If the Church dares to claim Christ as King, then we must dare to stand where Christ stands.

This means **standing with victims and survivors of abuse**, believing their stories, taking their pain seriously, listening without defensiveness, without minimisation, without rushing to protect the institution instead of the vulnerable. It means doing the incredibly hard work of challenging and being present to perpetrators and those alleged to be- However uncomfortable that may be. This is how cycles of abuse are broken. We have come to learn the hard way that Safeguarding is not an administrative layer added to ministry; it *is* ministry. It is one of the ways we proclaim the lordship of Christ—by refusing to tolerate the harm of those made in his image, but to love one another.

Every single *OTHER*.

It also means dismantling the systems of patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia that continue to distort the Church's witness and blunt the sharp edge of the Gospel. These forces scatter God's people; they undo our belonging, and they feed the crisis Jeremiah himself condemned.

The claim Christ is King is speak of a different kind of authority-

An authority that refuses to look away but chooses to face and heal the wounds of history.

An authority that doesn't call us to tolerate diversity, instead to celebrate it.

An authority that works for more than simply peace or simply justice. Because peace without justice is only quiet suffering; and justice without peace becomes bitterness.

And we've got enough of that going around in abundance.

Karl Barth once preached a sermon in a Basel prison about the crucifixion—and he said something astounding. Reflecting on the three crosses of that first Good Friday, Barth claimed that these three dying men formed the first Christian community.

A king in the centre.

Two criminals on either side.

No hymns or liturgy or creeds.

Just the raw and exposed human need to be remembered, articulated by Jesus (in one account) "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

From one criminal- Luke tells us - "*Save yourself—and us!*" he shouted.

The other criminal - "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*"

To be remembered. To be known. To be seen.

This is one of the most basic human needs.

I remember when I was home on holiday from theological college- my younger, rather inquisitive sister, after spotting that I was busy with an assignment on death and dying, asked me rather cheekily "*So, Mr Expert, where is heaven then?*"

I really didn't know what to say and pretended to not hear her.

She asked again.

I thought for a brief moment and replied:

"I don't know where heaven is, Jody, but wherever it is, God is there."

Wherever paradise is, God met this criminal there.

Barth went further. If this is the first Christian community, then both criminals belong to it.

Both of them.

The repentant one who asks for mercy - and the other one who mocks it.

And here is the question that bothers us:

Surely not him? Surely not the derisive one? Surely not the unrepentant one?

Would Jesus really welcome both? Would Jesus remember both in paradise?

"*Does that not sound like cheap grace?*" we ask.

But Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us:

"One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses make a church."

A church is not a gathering of the worthy- it is a gathering of the *real*.

The repentant, unrepentant. The hopeful, the cynical. The broken, the proud.

The ones who know their need of God - and the ones who have not yet realised it.

Too soon we forget that Jesus came not to heal the well but the sick,

not to call the righteous but sinners.

The idea that Jesus might have forgiven the first criminal may offend our moral sensibilities.

We prefer mercy for ourselves and justice- punitive justice- for others.

I love that the Gospel meets us in our own crisis of belonging today.

On Christ the King Sunday, we see what kind of king we serve—and therefore what kind of community we are called to be.

- If Christ's throne is a cross, then Christ's kingdom is the kingdom of the vulnerable.
- If the first Christian community is a dying king and two guilty men, then the Church is not a club for the pure but a home for those who need to be remembered.

People today hunger to be known, to be recognised, to be called by name.

I say this from an embodied space. In a church still grappling with *my* identity.

But I remain. I stand. I fight. I thank God for spaces like our Cathedral because I believe that the Church's vocation is more than pronouncing truth, but to practice belonging- to stand in

the margins, with those longing to be fully seen and heard in a church that is often tone-deaf, because that is where Christ stands.

As we bring to a close our Season of Reconciliation, we are invited to join that first Christian community at Calvary. To both criminals afresh- because both, in their own way, show us something true about ourselves.

We too are divided.

We too are conflicted.

We too sometimes cry out in faith and sometimes in despair.

We too, simply long to be seen and remembered.

And the astonishing truth of the Gospel is this:

Christ remembers us. Christ knows us. Christ welcomes us-
even when we do not know how to welcome one another.

I am realising, more and more, that a world in crisis does not need a triumphant church. It needs a remembering church. A reconciling church. A church that gathers rather than scatters.

A church that says to the forgotten, the lonely, the guilty, and the cynical:

"Today you are with us, you us! And we are you!"

"Today you belong."

"Today Christ remembers you."

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

For the Church

God of mercy, strengthen your Church to be a place of true belonging.
Where your people are scattered, gather them;
where they are wounded, heal them;
where they are complicit, correct them;
where they are hesitant, embolden them.
Make us faithful in safeguarding,
courageous in truth-telling,
gentle in care,
and steadfast in the work of reconciliation.

Response: Lord, hear us: Lord graciously hear us.

For Victims and Survivors

Christ who stands with the crucified,
we pray for all who suffer violence—
women, girls, LGBTQ+ people,
and all whose lives are marked by fear, silence, or danger.
Bring protection, justice, and deep restoration.
May they know their worth,
their dignity,
and the fullness of your remembering love.

Response

For Perpetrators and Those Who Harm

God of truth and transformation,
we pray for all who cause harm.
Grant them the courage to face their actions,
the honesty to seek repentance,
and the support needed to change their ways.
Break cycles of violence and remake hearts in your image.

Response

For Our Own Nation

God of every land,
we pray for our own country-
for victims of domestic abuse,
for those targeted by hate crime,
for families living in fear.
Guide all who bear responsibility for justice and protection,
that peace with justice may flourish here.

Response

For the Sick, the Weary, and the Grieving

Christ our Healer,
we bring before you all who are unwell,
in body, mind, or spirit.
We pray for those in hospital or care,
for those awaiting treatment,
and for all who feel forgotten or afraid.

We name before you now those who have asked for our prayers...

(Silence / names may be spoken aloud)

Surround them with your comfort,
restore their hope,
and hold them gently in your love.

Embrace in your eternal arms, Conqueror of Death, those who have died and comfort those who mourn their passing.

Response

For Ourselves

God of the Cross,
shape our lives according to Christ's mercy.
Where our hearts are narrow, widen them;
where our courage is thin, strengthen it;
where our understanding is small, enlarge it.
Make us a people who remember others as Christ remembers us.

Response

Merciful father...