



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, November 24, 2019**  
*Christ the King*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11:00am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells Vicar, St. Martin-in-the-Fields London, United Kingdom  
*on*  
Luke 23:33-43  
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### **Many a True Word**

I wonder what resonance the word king has for you. For some it suggests a merry mixture of fairy tale and medieval pageantry. For others conjures up a mixture of imperialism and patriarchy. Either way it may seem odd to celebrate kingship as an attribute of Jesus. Today I want to suggest how we meet Christ the king in our crucified savior.

The film *Priest* introduces us to Fr Greg, a young and rather earnest Catholic priest, new to parish ministry. The movie centers around two issues that torture and dominate his life. The first is that he's gay. Finding no legitimate outlet for this emerging part of his identity, he begins a secret relationship with a man he meets in a bar. The second is that he hears the confession of a teenage girl called Lisa. He learns that she is regularly being assaulted by her father. Later the father comes to confession too, and the priest is horrified to realize that this man bears no remorse for what he is doing. The seal of the confessional means Fr Greg cannot communicate this information to anyone. He struggles with that fact just as he wrestles with his own sexual identity. The power of his ability to pronounce or withhold forgiveness feels like nothing compared to his powerlessness to stop this terrible domestic tyranny. The two traumas of his life come to a crisis at much the same time. He faces the humiliation of being arrested for behaving improperly with another man in a public place. He gets no support from his bishop, and is forced to leave the parish. Meanwhile the truth of Lisa's domestic ordeal suddenly comes to light. In a harrowing scene, Lisa's mother emerges from an angry crowd, and, squaring up to Fr Greg, with a tearful, bitter and unforgiving gaze, says to him "You knew." Fr Greg has no idea what to say. Lisa's mother, now in disbelief, and with her fury momentarily diverted from her husband and focused on her fragile and despised priest, says, vengefully, "You *knew*."

This is the church Jesus died for. A church with lots of rules designed to keep us just and make us holy. Sometimes those rules are such that, try as we might, we can't keep them. Other times those rules are ones the keeping of which opens us to bitterness, fury, and even hatred. The movie shows us both dimensions in the life of Fr Greg. Either way the church is exposed to public hatred and ridicule.

Public hatred and ridicule is the way the people of Jerusalem receive Jesus' crucifixion. Of all the statements at the foot of the cross, the most poignant are the words of the temple authorities, who say, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." This perfectly sums up the story that Luke tells. The authorities think the joke's on Jesus, and that they're identifying the irony that Jesus can't do for himself what he can do for others. But meanwhile what they *can't* see is that the joke is finally on them, because first of all they've been drawn into identifying that Jesus has *indeed* saved others, a major acknowledgement for them to make, and secondly

that there's something unique about Jesus that makes both him and his suffering different from others. And that pretty much sums up the gospel. Jesus saves us but at terrible cost to himself. Many a true word is spoken in jest.

Our lives are indeed a perpetual mockery of Jesus. Our work is a parody of the self-sacrificial other-centered example of our Lord. Our relationships are a parody of the mutual-indwelling abiding trust of the Trinity. Our discipleship walk is a parody of the disciplined fraternal correction and compassionate forbearance Jesus commends. Our mission is a parody of humble and constant presence among the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner. Our congregational life is more like a squabble between self-righteous elder brothers than a welcome reception for prodigal sons. We are constantly at the foot of the cross, mocking the suffering Jesus.

But here's the irony. The more we mock, the truer Jesus becomes. The worse we fail, the greater grows our admiration and wonder at Jesus. The more pitiful our attempts to be faithful, the more necessary is our need for grace. The more we shout and scream at Jesus to come down from the cross, the more essential it is that he hangs there. The more we deride him and taunt him to save himself, the more we need him to save us. The more we demand that he act like the king of our dreams, the more desperately we need him to be the king that he is. The more the church fails, the more we highlight the truth and urgent necessity of Jesus' person and message.

In the drama that begins when Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, there are two great miracles. One is obvious, the one that God did – the miracle of resurrection. The other is more subtle, and it comes right at this moment. It is the miracle of what Jesus *didn't* do. He didn't come down from the cross. He stayed there. He outlasted our hatred and cruelty and enmity. After everything we could throw at him, physically and verbally, he was still there. His endurance demonstrated the love that will never let us go. His perseverance showed that nothing can separate us from the love of God. For ever after we can connect to God, not through our striving, but through Jesus' suffering, not through our longing, but through his lingering, not through our achieving, but through his abiding.

It's not the Jesus we want. We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross and ascends to his throne, the Jesus that rights wrong, ends pain, corrects injustice, sends the wicked away empty, sets the record straight and makes all well with the world. We want answers, we want solutions, we want a technological Jesus who fixes the problems. And we want those problems fixed now. We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross. This Jesus will not come down from the cross. This Jesus bears all things, endures all things, and never ends... This is not the God we want.

But it's the God we *need*. Oh how badly we need this God! Answers, explanations, solutions – they don't give us what we fundamentally need in the face of suffering and sin. What we need is love. What we need is a wondrous love through all eternity. Sure, what we *do* is show our inability to express that love. So we wash our hands like Pilate or run away like the disciples or lose patience like Judas or settle it with a sword like Peter. And so all the more what we *need* is a love that abides, that perseveres, that remains present to us, however bad things are, for however long it takes. What we *need* is a love that sticks around, a love that stays put, a love that hangs on. That's what the cross is. A love that hangs on.

Today is the conclusion of your congregational commitment season. Here's the paradox of commitment: our greatest, most generous financial offering is always a parody of Christ's commitment to us. We give because everything already belongs to God. But we give also in measure of our recognition that Christ has already shown us he's totally committed to us. We give because here and here alone we find a love that hangs on, a love that sticks around, a love that stays put. We give generously because we don't want our giving to be a ghastly parody of what God in Christ gives us.

The end of the film *Priest* contains the most moving scene I've ever witnessed in the cinema. Fr Greg returns to the parish after his time of humiliation and exile. The anger and hatred still smolders in the neighborhood and the parish. Lisa's mother's incandescent words, "*You knew*," are still ringing in his and our ears. Lisa hasn't been seen in the church since the truth about her household came to light. The senior priest, Fr Matthew, implores the congregation to receive Fr Greg back as their father in God. When it comes to receiving communion there are two stations for taking the bread, one from Fr Matthew, the other from Fr Greg. Every single worshiper at the service lines up to receive from Fr Matthew. Fr Greg stands alone, the body of Christ in his hands, totally shunned and visibly humiliated by the whole congregation. Seconds tick by and his isolation is crucifying. Somehow he has the courage and defiance to continue to stand alone – to hang in there. And then slowly but purposefully one solitary figure shuffles forward and stands before him to receive communion. It's Lisa.

Their eyes meet as she receives the communion bread. Her eyes say, "I know that you knew about my dad. But I know that you couldn't do anything about it. I understand your present powerlessness. I know it's because you believe in a greater power. You show me that by your courage in being present here right now. You're being crucified, but you're showing us a love that will not let us go."

That's the irony of the cross. That's the heart of Jesus' kingship. If Jesus had saved himself, he couldn't have saved us. His powerlessness shows us the endurance of God. Jesus hangs on the cross to show us the love that hangs on. Hang on to that love. It will never let you go.