

CHRIST THE KING
November 20, 2022, Year C
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[Jeremiah 23:1-6](#)

[Psalm 46](#)

[Colossians 1:11-20](#)

[Luke 23:33-43](#)

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, o Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

In 1989, my husband Mike and I visited Great Britain, and one of the highlights of that trip was a visit to the Tower of London. The final exhibit was a glimpse at the crown jewels. Although they are heavily guarded, the public is welcome to view them, provided one keeps moving around the enclosure; stopping to study them is not permitted. And believe me, after hearing about how so many of the royalty lost their heads there in the Tower over the years, I had absolutely no intention of stopping! So a glimpse of these priceless jewels was all I was able to get, but I will never forget what I saw.

What I noticed immediately as I entered the display area was the brilliance of each of the pieces. The ceremonial swords, the maces, the orb, the scepter, and of course, the imperial state crown that has been in use for the past 300 years or so. What struck me about the crown was the dazzling light and color that radiated from it. In fact, I could not believe how brilliant it was, so I did a bit of research after I returned home. And here are gemstones it contains: 2,783 diamonds, 17 sapphires, 277 pearls, 11 emeralds, and 5 rubies. Unbelievable! All of the stones are real, and the crown itself is priceless.

One very important point to note, however, is that at times during the history of the British monarchy, it was common practice for the crown to be set with jewels that were rented from jewelers for the coronation because the state could not afford to purchase the stones. Once the coronation was over, the valuable jewels were returned, and the crown itself was either set with imitation jewels or dismantled completely. What for a fleeting moment was priceless

would suddenly be rendered worthless. The value of the crown is actually the collective value of each of its components, but when those components are removed, the crown has no value.

In today's Gospel reading, we have a conversation between Jesus and two convicted criminals, all of whom have found themselves together in a horrendous situation by circumstance. The criminals both know who Jesus is, and they both now want Jesus to do something for them, but what they ask of him are two very different things and for two very different reasons.

The first criminal is really ticked off. He is focused on himself – on the agony that he is experiencing, on the embarrassment of the whole scene, and the fact that he can do absolutely nothing to help himself now. Never mind that he has committed a crime and is being justly punished for it. He knows that Jesus is purported to be the Son of God, and he is angry that the Son of God would allow this torture to continue, even for himself. He wants to be delivered from this situation only to be able to return to the life he has been leading, with no remorse for what he has done. And notice that Jesus does not respond to this criminal. Not because he does not want to, but because this first criminal does not acknowledge Jesus for whom he is.

The other criminal, however, addresses Jesus not in anger but in humility and repentance. He has obviously heard him speak of his kingdom that is not of this world. This criminal knows that his life is coming to an end, but he does not ask to be delivered from his present suffering. He knows that he does not deserve to be part of Jesus' kingdom, and he also knows that Jesus does not deserve the torture that he is currently experiencing either. This criminal is looking beyond this current life to what lies ahead. He acknowledges Jesus as the son of God, and he places his trust in him. He believes that the kingdom of which Jesus speaks exists, and he trusts that in some way this pathetic man dying beside him can show him this place.

Jesus' kingship on earth was one of suffering and rejection and humility, and he could not take his place on the heavenly throne until the sin of humankind that he bore had been destroyed. For Jesus, an earthly kingship built on political power would have been like renting costly jewels for a priceless crown then returning them, leaving only an empty shell that would then be

dismantled and rendered worthless. There are two questions I have for you now: 1) What in your spiritual life is worthless – what are those things that on the surface appear to be important but in fact you take for granted? And 2) What in your spiritual life is priceless – what are those things that give your spiritual life its true value?

Imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp toward the end of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent his time writing one of his best-known books, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book, Bonhoeffer speaks at great length about cheap grace and costly grace. In one passage, he describes cheap grace in this way: “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.” In a word, cheap grace is worthless. It is the dismantled crown.

Bonhoeffer then describes costly grace: “Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Costly grace is the kingly rule of God.” In other words, costly grace is priceless.

What does costly grace mean for us in our own lives? Costly grace is our call to action. It is obedience to Jesus’ call to follow him. It means living into the Gospel, seeking Christ in each and every person, being subject to one another and serving one another, reaching out to those in need, and continually returning to the Lord in repentance and seeking his forgiveness. Costly grace is discipleship. It is the priceless crown. As we heard in our reading from Colossians, “May you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption.”

Let’s consider the jewels of the British imperial crown again. Each one of the gemstones set in the crown has a story to tell. The huge sapphire set in the cross on the top belonged to Edward the Confessor. The giant ruby at the front of the band belonged to Henry V. Some of the pearls were worn as earrings by Elizabeth I. And the list goes on and on. When King

Charles is crowned next spring, he will be reminded of the rich history the gems in the British imperial crown hold. What is important to remember, however, is that each and every gemstone, regardless of the type and the color, and regardless of the size, came into being as a result of stress and pressure and heat within the earth's crust. These stones are considered precious because of their color and brilliance. But ironically, the rich colors of the rubies, sapphires, and emeralds are all the result of impurities in the crystalline structure as the stones were formed.

In seeking to live a life of discipleship, we are subjected to stress and pressure, and we are guaranteed to have impurities. But it is the stress and pressure and impurities that make us beautiful in the eyes of God as Christ's redeeming love radiates through us to the world. Like the gemstones to the monarchs, each and every one of us who has been made a member of Christ's body through baptism is indeed a precious stone in his crown. But if we are to share in his heavenly kingship, we are called to a life of discipleship – to a life of costly grace. And it is by living a life of discipleship that the light of his love will radiate through us, that his mercy will be made known to the world, and that his kingdom will increase. But if we choose to ignore the truth to which Christ calls us, and we follow the path of cheap grace instead, grace that is taken for granted, we become an empty space – a dark hole – in his heavenly crown.

As we now look toward the season of Advent, a time of expectation and preparation, I would challenge each of us to examine the setting prepared for us in the crown of Jesus at our baptism. What's in that setting right now, and what do people see? Do they see something fake? Do they see an empty hole? Or do they see a jewel so radiant with the light of Christ that it is dazzling? May his truth – his costly grace – increase in us daily, and may he so rule our lives that when others look at us they may see and know the kingship of Christ.

Amen.