

Kings Never Die

Christ the King Sunday, November 24, 2019

Luke 23:33-43

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The rapper Eminem has a song, “Kings Never Die.” It ends with the words, *Here to stay / Even when I’m gone / When I close my eyes / Through the passage of time / Kings never die*. But he’s wrong. Kings die. They really do. And often in strange ways.

Elvis Presley was the King of “Rock ‘N’ Roll,” and he died at age 42 from cardiac arrest. Martin Luther King, Jr. died by an assassin’s bullet at age 39. Jesus is described as “King of the Jews” (v. 38) and he died on a cross in his early 30s.

Kings die. All the time. But what if they were able to avoid such tragic ends? *The Atlantic* magazine recently posed the question: “Whose untimely death would you most like to reverse?” If you could turn back time and save a great leader, who would you pick? And what difference would it make?

Buddy Holly wasn’t the King of Rock ‘N’ Roll, but he is described as the *Father* of Rock ‘N’ Roll. His great songs, “That’ll Be the Day,” “Rave On,” and “Peggy Sue,” make you wonder how many other classics he might have written and recorded had he not died in a plane crash, aged 22.

Although not a true king, Robert F. Kennedy was a member of a family considered to be political royalty. Author Thomas Cahill wonders what America would look like today had he not died in 1968.

Actor Ashley Eckstein would like to reverse Walt Disney’s death. “Disney changed the world,” she writes. “Imagine how much more happiness and magic he could have spread had he not passed away early.”

Producer Alison Sweeney writes that “Abraham Lincoln’s assassination changed the trajectory of the United States. We’ll never know what could have been if he’d been able to finish his second term.”

Elvis. MLK. Buddy Holly. Bobby Kennedy. Walt Disney. Abraham Lincoln. Kings in their respective fields. The world would surely be different had they not suffered untimely deaths.

And Jesus? On this Sunday called “Christ the King,” Luke tells the story of the death of Jesus on the cross. A sign over the head of Jesus reads, “This is the King of the Jews,” and soldiers mock him, saying, “*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*” Even one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus taunts, “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*” (vv. 36-39).

Crucifixion was an excruciating and humiliating way for a king to die. In the case of Jesus, it was also an unjust sentence. The criminal on the other side of Jesus rebuked his fellow criminal, saying, “*We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong*” (vv. 40-41). Jesus died for crimes he did not commit. What might have happened if Pilate reversed the death sentence of Jesus? What if Jesus the King went on to live a long and happy life? Would the world be a better place? It is tempting to wonder what the world would be like if had not died, but sometimes, terribly shocking tragedies have unexpectedly good results.

Think back to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. His death was a hinge point in history, on par with Pearl Harbor and 9/11. It pivoted America from the calm of the 1950s to the turmoil of the 1960s. Kennedy was no Christ-figure, he had deep, personal flaws; but his death, like the death of Jesus, changed history. Initially, reaction to Kennedy’s assassination was nationwide shock and sorrow. Then the American people rallied around Kennedy’s vision of putting a man on the moon. President Lyndon Johnson invoked Kennedy’s memory to pass the Civil Rights Act. The death of JFK was a tragedy, but it was also a catalyst. His murder advanced projects and causes that might have gone unrealized had he lived.

We will never know Kennedy’s effectiveness in a full presidential term or two. In the same way, we will never know the full scope of Jesus’ ministry beyond Israel, although he always was quite clear that his kingdom was “*not from this world*” (John 18:36). As the great Christian thinker Henri Nouwen observed, “For Jesus, there are no countries to be conquered, no ideologies to be imposed, no people to be dominated. There are

only children, women and men to be loved.” All we know for sure is that the earthly ministry of Jesus ended on a cross. We accept the tragic death of Jesus as part of our religious history, and we understand that the evil done to him resulted in great good for us.

On a practical level, Christians fight injustice because we see Jesus, a completely innocent man, nailed to a cross with criminals on either side of him. Across the country, people are now working with the Innocence Project to exonerate wrongly convicted individuals. In South Africa, after the apartheid era, Christians such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which allowed victims and perpetrators to speak in public hearings and move toward reconciliation. Such a Christian focus on forgiveness comes from what Jesus said about his killers from the cross, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (v. 34).

Could such enormous good come without the cross? Perhaps. But the crucifixion of Jesus, like the assassination of JFK, proved to be both a shock and a stimulus. Kennedy’s death motivated the American people to work for progress, while the crucifixion of Jesus inspires Christians to fight injustice and do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Both tragedies point us toward the possibility that death is not the end, and that good can come out of evil.

The death of Jesus also forces us to confront our own mortality and to prepare for eternal life with God. After the second criminal defends Jesus from the cross, he says, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* And Jesus replies, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”* (vv. 42-43).

No earthly king can make this kind of promise, because no earthly king can offer us true and lasting forgiveness or eternal life. But Jesus the King is both human and divine, so his words give us the assurance that we will be with him in paradise. The struggles of this world will be over, we will be forgiven and made whole, and eternally united with God and with each other.

Each of us is going to come to the end of our life with feelings of guilt and regret. In this life we will do some evil things that we should not do, and we will fail to do some good things that we should do. Even if we don’t do anything blatantly *evil*, we will surely do some spectacularly *stupid* things we later regret.

Even if we work hard to fight injustice and do the hard work of reconciliation, we are going to make bad choices and crazy, stupid mistakes. Life is chaotic and complicated, and no one can live it without sin. Some of us will even feel as guilty as the criminal on the cross, who said to his fellow lawbreaker, *“We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds”* (v. 41).

With Jesus, however, we can trust God’s promise of forgiveness and eternal life. The criminal showed his trust by saying, *“Jesus, remember me,”* and Jesus rewarded this trust with the promise of Paradise. The criminal could do nothing from the cross to change his past. All he could do was put his faith in Jesus as his Savior, relying wholly on God’s grace to change his future. Fortunately, that is enough. Enough for him, and enough for us.

The criminal believes that King Jesus is going to continue to live and to come into his kingdom; more than anything else, the man wants to be with Jesus. He teaches us to accept that our lives are going to end, and that we can receive forgiveness and eternal life from a king who continues to rule from heaven. So maybe Eminem is right after all. Jesus is *Here to stay / Even when I’m gone / When I close my eyes / Through the passage of time / Kings never die.*

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you are the One to whom is given all dominion and glory and power. You are more majestic than all the wonders of creation. Your voice speaks truth; your life gives power; your love transforms. Your way is holy and just, for you are Ruler above all the kings of the earth. Forgive the fickleness of our feeble loyalty to your reign on earth and by your grace renew our love and faithfulness to you. Move our hearts toward one another so that with one voice we may faithfully proclaim your rule of steadfast love and peace in this world. Amen.

Sources:

- Dear, John. “Henri Nouwen’s Spirituality of Peace.” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 17, 2006, ncronline.org.
- “The Big Question: Whose untimely death would you most like to reverse?” *The Atlantic*, September 2018, 100.