

# Collect, Readings and Reflection for 23 November 2025, Christ the King

## **Collect** *(the Church's prayer for today):*

God the Father,  
help us to hear the call of Christ the King  
and to follow in his service,  
whose kingdom has no end;  
for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, one glory.

**Amen.**

## **Readings: Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43**

*Today's reflection is by Reader, Cal Bailey*

Let's imagine you're a king. You live in a dizzying castle, high up almost in the clouds, as all kings do. You have everything money can buy, everything influence can achieve, and everything power can claim. You're utterly independent: you don't need anyone. But one reality changes everything. You love a lowly maiden – a person without fame or fortune or fine features or fair favour. Your heart and soul and mind and strength are wrapped up in one question: How are you to win this lowly maiden's love?

You wrestle with this question. You toss and turn in your sleepless bed each night. You begin by thinking the ways kings do: you'll use your money, and influence, and power. You'll communicate to her, probably through an emissary, that she's your chosen one, and she'll be lifted from obscurity and brought to you like a banquet on a platter. How lucky for her. How magnanimous of you. How could she ever thank you?

But you're not a fool. You realise that this would provide you with her body, but not her soul, her will, or her heart. And you have no desire for the one without the others. You don't simply want her presence – you want her love. She would have no agency, no say in the question. She might be glad for the material blessings and the chance to advance her family's circumstances. She might be flattered, and even grateful. But none of these things are the same as love. She might learn to feign love – she might even convince herself for a season. But she'd never forget her origins and you'd never truly know if, on a level dance floor, she'd have chosen you. You'd remain a tyrant at worst or a benefactor at best.

So you come up with an idea: Plan B. You think, 'Let's take money out of the equation. Let's make sure she has wealth and acclaim before she knows why, and let's reassure her that they're a free gift and she won't lose them if she doesn't reciprocate my love. Let's raise her to my social level and so overcome the distance between us.' You begin to prepare a new castle in the air and all the possessions she could want. You get

carried away with the excitement of having found a solution. But you soon realise this won't work. All she'll know of you is your wealth and grandeur. If she came to love you, you'd never really know why. She may love you out of gratitude or she may be delighted to be partnered with someone of her now exalted social standing. She may value the acclaim more than she values you. How would you ever really trust her?

But all is not lost. Reflecting on the problems in exalting the maiden's lowly status leads you to a third, much riskier plan. You could remove the trappings of majesty and adopt the clothes of poor man. Then, if she falls for you, you'll know it's not because of the power and wealth and influence and acclaim that you offer her. She'd truly be choosing you for the right reasons. There's a huge risk that she might reject your love, of course, but there isn't the same risk that she'll simply be using you, or you her. Yet this third plan is swathed in deception, in disguise, in superficial appearance and ultimately in deceit. Sooner or later you're going to whip off your costume – or the mask will slip by itself. She thought she was loving you as an equal, but it would turn out you'd engineered the whole thing. How can real love begin with so giant a lie? How would she ever really trust you?

After countless restless nights you accept there's only one way to realise your desires. You must become like the one you love. You must become poor. It mustn't be a pretence, a subterfuge, a game, a sleight of hand. It must be for real. You must leave aside all the trappings of majesty and take up the lowly life of a lowly person like the lowly maiden that's taken possession of your heart. If she rejects you, well, that's the risk of love: being a king can't bypass or protect or subvert or shortcut the dangerous and delicate drama of enthrallment and rejection, rapture or misery.

There's no turning back. Once you realise that this is the choice, there's no question: of course you'll do it. The trappings of majesty are nothing to you compared to the heart of your beloved. You'll risk it all, because in all this heart-searching you've made a vital discovery: that you only truly value what you can fully share. And so you become a lowly servant. You're still a king: but no one who's used to meeting kings would recognise you. And your new form isn't a trick or a device: even if the maiden rejects you, you'll remain in the form you've become. There's no going back.

By now you'll have recognised this parable and its characters. The king in the parable is God. The lowly maiden is you and me. God could have remained aloof and beyond and outside our imagination and experience. But this is the central mystery, the heart of the wonder of grace. God loved us. We don't know why: we know it wasn't because we were beautiful, or worthy, or talented, or faithful. God just loved us.

God could have wooed us with gifts, and status, and luxury, and bribes. That was the king's first option. Maybe that's what the splendours of lakes, and waterfalls, and sunsets and flowers and butterflies are. But what kind of love do such things evoke in us? Gratitude, maybe: wonder, quite possibly; but too often a will to possess, to subdue, to own.

Alternatively God could have raised us up to be like gods ourselves. That was the second option. Maybe that's what happens when we fly beyond the speed of sound, or obliterate a million people with a single bomb, or earn a billion dollars.

Or there's the third option. God could have deceived us by pretending to be just like us before ripping the mask away when the going got uncomfortable. But God didn't do any of these things. God in Christ set aside the trappings of majesty, and, while never ceasing to be a king, was voluntarily stripped of all the comforts and acclaim and protection we associate with the kingly picture of God. When he stood on trial before Pilate, when he hung naked on the cross, Christ had nothing left but his love of us. Why did God in Christ take this terrible, absurd risk, a risk almost bound to end in disaster? For no other reason than that God loved us, and wanted our genuine, heartfelt, uncomplicated love in return. What a huge risk. And a risk that, as today's gospel vividly displays, proved indescribably costly.

The humble maiden rejected the love of the lowly servant. In Luke's description of the crucifixion, the leaders, the soldiers, and the first thief all goad Jesus into going back to being the king in his castle, the king who can remove the mask and snap his fingers and use power and influence to fix everything. 'Come down from the cross,' they say. 'Save yourself and us.'

Only the second thief understands what almost everyone in the gospel story's missed: not only that this truly is the king, but also that this king's laid aside his majesty because of love for people just like these two between whom he's being crucified. In many ways this is the climax of Luke's gospel, because here, at the moment of greatest rejection and greatest sacrifice and greatest agony, finally someone gets it. Finally someone realises what this was all about; finally Jesus sees the glory of being loved in return. Paradise breaks through when for the first time someone looks at Jesus and sees not the opportunity of what Jesus can do for them but the sheer joy of his being with them. The poignancy of that discovery coming at the most utterly horrific moment in the history of the universe is the heart of the mystery of faith.

See what's happened here, in the wonder of the incarnation and in the horror of the cross: God hasn't stopped being a king; God's redefined what it means to be a king. If we're to look for true kingship, it's to be found among those who do as Christ has done; among those who set aside the power, the acclaim, the influence to discover love in true encounter. In Christ, in the crucified Lord, God is presenting us with a transformed picture of what it means to be a king.

Remember Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. We angst about whether Jesus' instructions to go, sell, give, come, and follow really apply to us. But think about our parable of the king and the maiden: this is exactly what God does in Jesus – sheds all the trappings of majesty and sets off after us. Jesus is saying, you've got the question wrong: it's not 'What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?' The question is, says Jesus, 'Do you love me?' If you love me, do what I've done – set aside all other goals, seek me, and all other things will be added unto you.

We want to settle for option 3 – to hold on to wearing the mask – to be able to switch back to our other life if our pursuit of God comes to grief. But that's not love. That's calculation. That's not the way God loves us. God has no plan B. God has put every egg in our basket. God has no mask.

In this astonishing moment we see that to be a king means not to be cosseted by privilege but to be stripped naked by love. And at this most precious, most painful, most intimate moment of loving and dying finally the lowly maiden responds to the king, and says, 'Jesus, remember me.'

It's the only moment in all four gospels when anyone simply calls our Lord by his simple name, 'Jesus.' Not 'Son of God,' not 'Christ,' not 'Immanuel' or any of a hundred other names. Just this simple name, Jesus. Jesus, remember me. The king's stripped down to just that single name. In that simple, naked, name humanity has finally, in the form of this dying thief, realised what the whole story, the whole Bible, was about. And Jesus, in his dying breath, says finally, poignantly, beautifully, and definitively, 'Together, today, you and I: on the cross, despite the cross, through the cross – we will be together in paradise.'

[The story of the king and the maiden is adapted from Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Translated by Howard V and Edna H Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985). And the original sermon is from Revd Sam Wells.]