

25 November 2007
Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A King Who Works For You”

Text: Malachi 3:13-18; Luke 23:27-43; Colossians 1:13-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A book on church outreach and evangelism was published not too long ago, with the premise that people outside the Church don't really care what is truth or not – they simply want to know: “Does it work?” Not “is it true?” but “does it work?” So, this book goes on to say, that should be the basis of the Church's evangelism and outreach. We shouldn't try to convince people that Christianity is true, these authors say, but that it works. It delivers. It will give people what they are looking for.

Well, all I can say to that is: *don't have these people read the book of Malachi!* (Or actually, maybe they should!) For from that prophet today, we heard exactly the opposite message. The people were complaining that God **wasn't working**. Their worship and devotion weren't working. God wasn't delivering. They weren't getting what they were looking for. For look, they said! “*It is vain to serve God. What is the profit . . . ? We call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.*” It doesn't work, all this Temple and sacrifice stuff. It doesn't work, our prayers and good deeds. It doesn't work, Malachi, prophet of “God.” Why should we stay? Why should we bother?

Perhaps you recognize some of those questions. Not only from people you know, *but banging around in your own head*. What difference does it make whether or not I repent today? Or if I sleep in and skip church? Why bother to do good and help my neighbor, read God's Word, or pray? The world goes on. My loved ones still leave, or die. I still have my struggles at work and at home. My life is still a mess. And besides all that, look! All these people who are selfish, and never go to church, and never pray – they're happy and rich and care free! So why should we bother, O pastor? Why should we stay? It doesn't really make a difference. It's not working.

So what should we say? Does it work? Does it make a difference?

These are important questions. That go to the heart of the matter of faith and the Church. And the answers? Well, they depend on what kind of kingdom you're looking for.

If you're looking for a kingdom here on earth, of riches and power, of wealth and glory, then a King reigning from a cross and not jumping down in power **is probably not going to work for you.**

If you're looking for a kingdom where you are admired and affirmed, and where you are told that you're basically good and okay – *don't change a thing in your life!* – then the Law of God and its message of sin and repentance **is probably not going to work for you.**

If you're looking for a kingdom where you are initiated into the halls of power and influence, and where your thoughts and wisdom are trumpeted and revered, then a Baptism into a new life as a child of God **is probably not going to work for you.**

If you're looking for a kingdom where you are king, and your every wish and desire is granted, you have no suffering, and your life is filled with only luxury and ease, then a Supper of body and blood and forgiveness of sins **is probably not going to work for you.**

If you're looking for a kingdom where everyone gets what they deserve and what they got coming, then a King who is merciful and gracious and comes to die for His enemies – *and even prays for their forgiveness while He is being executed by them!* – **is probably not going to work for you.**

And so if your kingdom is the **kingdom of ME**, then no, this King is not going to work for you. You're going to be disappointed. For this King has different designs, different ideas, different goals than you and your kingdom. **Which is good.** For look at you and your kingdom – is it really that great? Or is it not passing away? When you think you're on top, someone else comes along. If you're being praised one day, it's someone else the next. One day you're healthy, the next you're flat on your back. The people and things you thought you could count on let you down . . . *again.* You thought things would be different, and no matter how hard you try . . . **So how ya' doing, king?** Still want Jesus to help you patch up your own little,

decrepit, pathetic, fallin' apart, temporary, shack of a kindgom?

Or maybe there's something more. A better kingdom. A lasting kingdom. With a real King. A king's King. The King of kings. A kingdom not just of this little world (or my part of it!), but of all worlds. A kingdom of right, not wrong; of peace, not strife; of life, not death. A kingdom where hope does not eventually run out, but where hope is fulfilled. A kingdom where that which defeats us is itself defeated! A kingdom – *should we say it?* – of truth.

You know that there is! That's why you're here. To repent of yourself and your own kingdom building, and receive that which is greater. To repent of listening to the lies of satan, and instead have your ears and eyes and mouths and hearts filled with the truth. Filled with the One who not only *speaks* the truth, but is the truth. The King who reigned from the cross, not because He was weak – but because He was strong enough to stay. That He be not only the King of kings, but that He be your King. For that is what He wants most of all. **You**. To give you life. To give you Himself.

And so He has! For as we heard from St. Paul: “*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” Or in other words, He has transferred us from our own kingdoms of darkness and death, and into His kingdom of light and life. A past tense transfer that continues to take place every time He transfers our sins from us to Himself. In Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Supper, transferring our sins to Himself, bestowing His forgiveness and life to us, and making us citizens of a kingdom which has no end. A Kingdom where I am not king, and that is good! For there is a better King, who is on the throne not for Himself, but **FOR ME**.

And in this kingdom, “*Does it work?*” is not played off against “*Is it true?*” **It works because it is true.** Yes, because God really did come and die for us. Yes, in Jesus, *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*. Yes, in His death and resurrection, Jesus defeated our enemies and reconciled us to the Father. Yes, in Him, we are now what we were not before – sons of God, citizens of a *new* kingdom, and heirs of the promise of eternal life. . . .

How do you know? Because those words spoken by Jesus from the cross – words of forgiveness and the promise of paradise – were spoken not just to others, but here, to you. No matter how old, no matter how young. For as your sins put Jesus on the cross, so His words of forgiveness spoken for those who put Him there are for you.

And the thief on the cross next to Jesus? Yup, that's you. That's the due reward of your deeds. That's how your kingdom's going to wind up - in a bloody mess! . . .

Unless you are remembered by the King. And then your blood doesn't have the final word - His does. His blood which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:24) His blood which is shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. His blood which is here poured over your lips, and with it given to you the promise of paradise. Yes, "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" Maybe not this 24 hour day called Sunday, November 25th - but the Today in which our Lord lives. The Today which has no end. For here, the light is breaking into the darkness. Here, His kingdom is breaking down our kingdoms. Here, we join the angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven. One Church, One King, One truth.

And with this truth and kingdom, we have all that we need. We have peace to face even death. We have contentment, with much or with little. We have purpose and meaning in life. We have forgiveness for all our past mistakes and shortcomings and guilt. We have hope in the midst of suffering, and in a future which has no end.

And as another Church Year draw to a close, we rejoice in this, as we have rejoiced all the year - in our King, in His work, and in His Kingdom. We rejoice in His forgiveness and life, in His mercy and love. We rejoice that He does not give us what we deserve, but the gifts we do not. We rejoice in His *truth*, for this is the truth that works. The Truth that has come, and is coming again, to set us free. (John 8:36)

In the name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.