

November 24, 2019
Christ the King
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Welcome Home: To a Glorious Kingdom

Luke 23:35-43 (NIV)

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Esther was a Jewish young woman who was chosen by King Xerxes to be his next queen after the first queen defied him. But even as the wife of Xerxes and queen of Persia, Esther was scared to even approach the king, her husband, unless he called for her. Anyone who approached the king without permission could be executed. Xerxes spared her life when she dared to approach. But that is the kind of power kings had over everyone in their kingdom. Imagine what would happen if someone insulted a king like that or made an attempt to harm him. Death would be certain but maybe not fast.

About 500 years after Xerxes, there was a king we know as Herod the Great. He killed anyone who might be a threat to his throne even members of his own family. He murdered the baby boys around Bethlehem after Jesus was born. Surely you wouldn’t want to cross Herod, say anything against him or threaten him in any way. He had power over the lives of all in his kingdom.

As we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, we have a portion of Scripture before us that presents a very different kind of king. Christ is not a king like Xerxes or Herod. They kept their place as king in their kingdom by killing others. Jesus is King of all by dying for all. Of all those who witnessed Christ’s crucifixion, only a few understood what was really happening. Only a few believed that Christ is King. One was a criminal who was crucified with Christ. May we see Christ as he sees Christ, as King of all.

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Throughout Christ’s ministry, the Pharisees, Sadducees and other leaders of the Jews had challenged Jesus and tried to trap him in his words. But they rarely confronted him directly. Sometimes they spoke to the disciples. Sometimes they just thought wicked things about Christ. But Christ would answer them even when they tried to hide their words and thoughts from him. During Holy Week, Jesus had been in more direct confrontations with these leaders. They tried their best to discredit Jesus and make him look foolish. They asked him by whose authority he was teaching. They asked about paying taxes to Caesar.

They gave Jesus a riddle about seven brothers marrying a woman and asked whose wife she will be in the resurrection. But Jesus had the perfect response for every challenge and finally they stopped asking him questions. They were no match for the wisdom of Christ.

But on Friday, they regained their courage. Jesus was nailed to a cross. Blood streamed down his face from the crown of thorns and from his back that was raw from the floggings. He is struggling to breathe as his body hangs from his nail pierced hands. Now the leaders are bold again and sneer at him. Now they are not afraid to insult him. For the Messiah sent from God would never allow this to happen to him. *“He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”*

They said what they believed about Jesus to hurt him and to convince any Jew listening to abandon any hope that Jesus is the Messiah. Surely God would not allow his beloved Chosen One to suffer crucifixion. Surely you don’t want to follow a king who is so weak that he can’t prevent his own death. How can he save you if he can’t save himself?

The soldiers join in. A king should have the finest wine to drink so they mock him by giving him the worst. A king in their Roman world should be strong so they imitate the Jewish leaders and mock him for not being able to save himself.

The sign even mocks Christ. “This is the King of the Jews” should be shouted by the crowds in adoration when Jesus walks by. It should be written on the gate of his palace. It should be written with jewels in his crown. But it is not a complement when posted on the cross upon which Christ is nailed. Pilate was probably insulting the Jewish leaders by posting this notice too but it told everyone who passed by who the real power, the real king in this world was. Caesar had the power to execute anyone, even one who claimed to be the Messiah of God.

And then the criminals who were being crucified mocked Christ. Matthew tells us that both of them began insulting him. Luke tells us that one continued. *“Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* How could this man be expected to believe that Jesus is the Messiah when Jesus can’t help himself? How could he believe that Jesus was the King unless Christ saved this man from execution?

Early in Christian history the Church had to struggle with this question: How could the Son of God die on the cross? Some decided that that God part of Jesus left him when he was on the cross so that only the human part of Jesus died. But the Bible teaches us that Jesus Christ is not part God and part man. When Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, he was and always is true God and true Man in one person. Christ cannot be split into two parts. When Christ dies, the God-Man dies. This is a stumbling block to many in our world who refuse to trust in such a seemingly weak God.

The devil spins this deception a little differently to Christians. When things don’t go according to our plan in our lives, the devil is there to mock Christ. Why follow a king who doesn’t keep you safe or make your life better? The devil, the world and our sinful nature tell us that our lives should be healthy and wealthy and happy if we are following the King of the universe. So there is either something wrong with us or Jesus is not King.

The same false expectation can happen with churches. The devil and our sinful nature tell us that our church should be outwardly successful if Christ is truly King. Our membership should be growing by leaps and bounds and there should be no problems in the congregation. People in the community should honor and respect us at all times and there should be a waiting list for the membership classes. If this is

not true, our sinful nature wants us to change what is taught so it is more palatable to the world around us. If we just softened or ignored what the Bible says about closed Communion, marriage, abortion, roles of men and women, baptism, conversion, fellowship and that Jesus is the only way to heaven, then we might be more attractive to others. But Christ says to teach everything he has commanded. Doing this might mean that our congregations are small and less acceptable to the world. Do we trust that Christ is King or are we looking for what a worldly king can give?

The other criminal on the cross trusted that Christ is King.

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

What this criminal does shows his amazing God-given faith. If you want help, you normally turn to someone who is able to help you. The most powerful person in Jerusalem at this time would seem to be Pilate, the Roman governor. But the criminal does not appeal his case to Pilate. He does not request mercy from the soldiers. He does not request help from the Jewish leaders. He doesn't turn to the crowd and ask for rescue. Instead, he turns to the man next to him on a cross. He turns to Jesus who is bleeding, struggling to breath and will soon take his last breath. He turns to the one who looks the weakest and asks for the biggest gift possible. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And after a day of suffering, the criminal's life on earth ended, but his life in paradise began.

Isn't this what we really want from Jesus? We want him to remember us. Remember us and forgive our sin. Remember us and how much we need his help. Remember us and bring us to heaven. And that is exactly what our King has done. By his suffering and death, he remembered us and paid for our sin. By his resurrection from the dead he remembered us and promises to raise us to life again too. By his ascension into heaven he continues to remember us as he rules all things at the right hand of God in order to bring us to heaven.

Jesus lived and died humbly on this earth. He did not look much like a king of this world. And for that we should be grateful. For Jesus did not sit in heaven and send us to fight the battle. He did not send his people out to die to protect him and his kingdom. Christ the King led the way into battle. He faced temptation and defeated it for us. He took the punishment we deserved for sin and suffered it on the cross. He overcame death and rose to life again so that we will too. Christ our King does not enjoy these victories by himself but has brought us into his glorious kingdom and we will enjoy the victory with him in paradise forever.

Amen.