

**Luke 23:35-43** *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." <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar<sup>37</sup> and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." <sup>38</sup> There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. <sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

What kind of King do you follow?

1. one who was mocked for you
2. One who promises paradise to you

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, called Christ the King Sunday. We celebrate the fact that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. But if he is King of kings, why do we have young children being attacked by molesters? Why do we have school shootings and deadly hurricanes? What kind of a King is this Christ if all this happens on his watch? What kind of a king is this who allows so much suffering? What kind of a king is this who doesn't use his resources to take away crosses? What kind of a king is this Christ who doesn't even have the power to get himself off the cross?

Jesus was bruised and covered with blood. The flesh on his back was shredded. He had been stripped of his clothing and all human dignity. Iron spikes immobilized his hands and feet. Jesus didn't look anything like a king. Kings are supposed to ride on magnificent stallions. Kings are supposed to be accompanied by adoring crowds and powerful armies. Kings are supposed to wear ornate armor and crowns of gold, not prickly thorns. Kings are supposed to command authority, not invite ridicule. So, what kind of a King is he? What kind of a King do you follow?

*There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.* What is it that really bothered the Jews? Here was this man dying in shame as a common criminal and Pilate calls him a king. Even worse he called him the king of the Jews. That was low. That was mean. They didn't want to be associated with him. Not a king who seemed so weak. "With scorn and loathing and contempt, they stand there and proclaim: 'Look at him there, all you who pass by! Look at him! No Savior, this one! No, he is a fraud and cheat. Prove us wrong, Jesus! If you are the Son of God, come down, come down from the cross!'" (Dan Deutschlander, Behold the Hidden Glory of the Cross, p. 30) And there he hangs apparently too weak to do anything about it.

*One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"* This was more than an insult. This was a temptation. This was the devil's work. Our salvation hung in the balance as this criminal spoke. Jesus sweat drops of blood in intense prayer as he struggled with this very temptation the night before. The pain was only imagined then. Now it was real, unbearable, and getting worse.

*"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."* He could not save himself, but the reason was not his own weakness. Make no mistake who Jesus is. Paul told us in the lesson today from Colossians: He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things. (Colossians 1:17-20) He had the power to come down from the cross, but not the will. The bonds that held Christ captive on the cross were the bonds of his everlasting love and mercy for you and me.

What kind of a King do you follow? We follow a King who was mocked for us, who was weak for us, who bled and died for us.

But on this Christ the King Sunday don't we have that nagging thought in our hearts that we would like to see Jesus show his power in our lives? Isn't that what we are really saying when we want some proof that the Bible is true? When we challenge God to prove himself by healing our sick spouse or giving us that new job or helping us past that test? Every time we get angry with God for not taking care of some problem, aren't we saying that we don't want to follow a weak king, a suffering king. We want to follow a powerful King who will take care of our problems.

I know a woman who experienced the loss of her father and then her husband to suicide within a few weeks. For many years she was angry with God. Why? Jesus let her down. Where was the power to help? Don't we feel that same

way? Like the criminal on the cross we want to yell out, "Jesus, save yourself AND US!" How do we reconcile Jesus' rule of the world with all the bad stuff that happens? Christ is King but does it bother you that you can't point to anything he has done to prove it?

When those questions run through our minds, let us listen to the promises of the King. *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"* <sup>41</sup> *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."* <sup>42</sup> *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

He was guilty and he knew it. Oh, he had protested his innocence all through the hearing. He tried to do whatever he could to avoid the judge's sentence, but it was to no avail. He had been found guilty of capital crimes and, since he was just a common Jew and not a Roman citizen, the sentence was crucifixion. And in this court system justice was swift and certain. He had seen crucifixions. There were plenty of them under Roman occupation. They were not a pretty sight. He did everything he could to get out of it. He begged and he pleaded. He tried to run. He fought against his captors. But there was no escape, not from a whole troop of Roman soldiers.

He was guilty and Jesus was not. How much he knew about Jesus we don't know. He must have had a pretty good knowledge of Jesus because he confessed that Jesus has done nothing wrong. Literally, he said he has done nothing "out of place." Jesus had not done one thing that was not what he was supposed to do. He had not said one word that wrongly hurt or slandered someone. He never gave an adulterous look at a beautiful woman walking down the street. He never had a moment of jealousy at the neighbor with the bigger house. He never experienced even a twinge of hatred against those who unjustly crucified him. His record before the Father in heaven was and remains spotless. Not one thing in his life was out of place.

The dying criminal confessed that about Jesus, but he confessed more. "Remember me," he said. "Remember me?" You like people to remember you, at least when you do something memorable. You're thrilled when somebody remembers how you scored the winning goal in soccer.

But this man, with all his crimes and all his guilt asks to be remembered. Why? Because he could see past the cross and the humiliation to see the Savior. He could see past the thorns and the nails to see forgiveness in Jesus' death. So, he prayed, "Remember me."

That's all he asked. He doesn't ask for a reserved seat in heaven. He doesn't ask for glory. He only asks to be remembered. His faith understood what Pilate was unable to comprehend. He believed that Jesus was a king and his kingdom was not of this world. *"Remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

*Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."* Jesus promised this dying criminal a gift, "a free gift totally unmerited and so obviously undeserved, a gift for which the thief can never repay even in the least. Jesus promises him heaven! That heaven will be his not after he has suffered a while in some imagined purgatory. It will be his that very day." (Deutschlander)

Jesus promised him paradise, a place far removed from the grizzly horrors of Golgotha. Paradise! A fortress on high, where Christ would forever reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. Paradise! Where there would be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain." (Revelation 21:4)

Do you want to see God's power in your life? Would you like some proof that Jesus is King? Do you wish that he would demonstrate his control over the world by taking your problems away? Are we still looking for Jesus' power or are we trusting in his love? Just as he loved us too much to leave his cross, so he loves us too much to take away our crosses: The spouse who can no longer care for himself. The boss or teacher who is just unfair. The rejection we experience because of our faith. The cancer that has resurfaced. Our King has the power to take those away but in love he may choose not to.

But he does give us a promise. All these things will work for good to bring us to paradise. It's a promise that carries us through sickness and suffering, troubles and pain. It's a promise that comforts us as we stand by the grave of a loved one. This promise tells us that through faith in Jesus our loved ones right now are in paradise enjoying complete and perfect fellowship with God.

And this promise tells us that one day, when our King decides the time is perfectly right, he will beckon us home to heaven with words every bit as sweet as those spoken to that man on the next cross so many years ago. *"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

What kind of a King do you follow? A King who was mocked for you, who died for you. A King who promises you paradise. May we follow this King to glory.