

The King Comes Into His Kingdom

Luke 23:27-43

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

November 24, 2019 – Last Sunday of the Church Year



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Today is the day which marks the Last Sunday of the Church Year. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Advent, and before you know it Christmas will soon be knocking at the door and you'll find yourselves all wrapped up in what most people consider to be the most joyous season of the year. But as you consider all the many festivities of the Christmas season, does it not seem more than just a little strange, perhaps odd, that the Gospel reading appointed for this Last Sunday of the Church Year also happens to be one of the very same readings appointed for Good Friday?

Perhaps some of you know this already, but this particular Sunday has also at times been called "Christ the King Sunday." Knowing that, then maybe the selection of this Good Friday reading might not seem so strange after all. I say that because in this particular account of the crucifixion, Luke the evangelist informs us of the fact that Christ *is* our King – and this is made especially clear when you consider the inscription which was written above His head on the cross which identified Him as "King of the Jews." And then, of course, there's the plea of the penitent thief to our Savior that He remember him when He comes into His kingdom.

Now when you think about a king coming into his kingdom, one picture that's often associated with such an occasion is a grand, glorious entrance – a parade, perhaps – filled with grandeur, pomp and circumstance. But the coronation of Jesus as King was a very strange coronation, indeed. To be sure, we've all heard the account concerning how Jesus was led in procession to His coronation, but rather than being led to a throne room in a grand palace, instead He was led out to the place of the skull and Calvary's cross, where He was crucified and suffered the most shameful, degrading death anyone could ever imagine. There He would be nailed to a cross – an instrument of torture designed to eliminate and humiliate criminals. There He would die a slow, agonizing death. That's how Jesus came into His kingdom.

In the days of our Lord, it was customary that a placard with an inscription be placed over a condemned criminal's head, which would proclaim the reason for his execution. On the placard Pilate placed above the head of Jesus were written these words: "This is the King of the Jews." This statement was, of course, high-

ly offensive to the leaders of the Jews, who had persuaded Pilate to have our Lord crucified – against Pilate's better judgment, I might add. They had lied to Pilate and told him that Jesus was leading a popular revolt against Caesar, although Pilate could see it was really out of jealousy that they wanted to have Jesus killed. But since Pilate couldn't afford the risk having an uncontrollable riot erupt on his watch, he buckled, gave in to their demands, and had this Innocent Man put to death.

The irony of the placard hanging above Jesus' head declaring Him to be "King of the Jews" was not lost on the crowd. The Jewish rulers mocked Jesus mercilessly, crying out: "He saved others; let Him save himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!" And we also read that the Roman soldiers likewise ridiculed him, saying: "If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" Even one of the two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus railed against Him. "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"

But the other criminal who was being crucified with Jesus witnessed all of this as well, and by God's grace, the light began to dawn in his head and his heart as to who this Jesus really is – and this, in spite of the unjust punishment our Savior was receiving along with them. By the witness of Jesus' extraordinary words and deeds, His extraordinary character, and by the working of the Holy Spirit to bring this thief to repentance and faith, he was somehow able to recognize the hidden beauty, the hidden majesty, and the hidden divine glory in this truly righteous Man who was dying alongside of him. That was when he turned his head toward Jesus and pleaded: "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

What an expression of faith! There was Jesus – true God and true man – seemingly helpless, dying, nailed to a cross, and yet this penitent thief recognized that His was a divine kingdom into which He was coming. The power of God, you see, is such that even death cannot stop it. The Messiah, the Christ, *will* enter into His kingdom, and no one nor anything will be able to prevent it! Scripture had long promised the coming of the Messianic King, and there He was! Here was this righteous, holy King, who would deliver God's people from their misery and usher in an age of blessing through His everlasting kingdom. Jesus' character, His words and

His deeds, show that He is the fulfillment of God's ancient promises, that he is God's Chosen One. How Jesus was wrongly put to death and how He endured it only accents the righteous nature of His Person. Men are revealed as sinners, Jesus is revealed as righteous – indeed, as our only Messiah and the King. It all comes out clearly at the cross.

“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” This really must be divinely wrought faith, for in this man's plea as a justly condemned sinner, even as he was dying, it's clear that he truly expected to receive mercy from God's Messiah. There was no ordinary reasoning that should have caused him to expect such a thing. Only God is able to create this kind of faith. There we see two condemned men, dying side by side – one a criminal, the other the Son of God. On what basis should the criminal have expected the other Man to remember him in mercy and act on his behalf when that He comes into His glorious kingdom – after He dies? Is this lunacy? A hallucination? Madness? No, call it what it is, simple Christian faith.

But Jesus heard the man's plea and acknowledged it for what it was. He acknowledged and accepted the truth of what the thief was saying: that He, Jesus, is the Messianic King who will act in mercy; that the penitent thief's faith was well founded, not madness; and that his prayer would receive an answer – in fact, much sooner than he might have expected. Jesus said to the man: “Truly, I say to you today, you *will* be with Me in Paradise!”

What a wonderful promise! And Jesus frontloaded it with His strongest expression of assurance: “Truly I say to you.” Whenever Jesus uses these words, you know He really means it! Whatever follows those words is always of utmost importance. “Truly, I say to you today, you *will* be with Me in Paradise.” “Today.” Wow! How can this be? On that very day when both Jesus and the thief were both dying on a cross? On that blackest of black Fridays? On that day when everything looked the worst, that was the day Jesus would come into his kingdom and the thief would receive His mercy? Amazingly, yes!

“Today you *will* be with Me.” Ah, now *there* is a promise, *there* is the mercy this man was seeking. He *would* be with Jesus. Where Jesus is, where the King is, there is His kingdom. “You *will* be with me in Paradise.” Paradise, the abode of the saints, those who are blessed by the Lord to live with Him in His heavenly kingdom – a return to the Garden, God and man living in peaceful harmony and fellowship once more. And,

the surprising thing is that it starts on the very day when Jesus died on a cross. For *this* – yes, this most shameful, loser-like death – *this* is how Christ the King comes into His kingdom. This was and is why Jesus is able to promise this man, this sinner – indeed all sinners, including you and me – this is how He is able to say to us, even on the day of our death, “*You* will be with Me in Paradise.”

Will Jesus remember you, dear Christian? Oh, yes! He will remember you, and remember you in mercy, because he was dying also for you when He hung there on that cross next to that penitent thief. Will Jesus remember you? Oh, yes! He will remember you because your name is written in his Book of Life. Your name was inscribed there when you were washed in the waters of Holy Baptism. Will Jesus remember you? Yes, yes, it shall be so! Our Lord's promise to the penitent thief is his promise to you as well: “Today” – whenever that dying day may come for you, you have Jesus' promise – “Today you *will* be with Me in Paradise.”

Death cannot stop the coming of Christ's kingdom. Indeed, it is Christ's own death that has already ushered it in! For by His death, He has taken away the sin of the world. This is He “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,” St. Paul tells us in Colossians, “peace by the blood of His cross.” Christ's own resurrection then on Easter Day shows us the results of the God-Man's death: Life and immortality come to light. Now the kingdom of blessing and eternal life is open to you. The new age has dawned, already now, today – this very day.

Today we heard the penitent's plea: “Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom.” More than that, we heard the King's reply: “Truly, I say to you today, *you will* be with Me in Paradise.” Christ the King comes into his kingdom on the cross, on Good Friday, the day He calls “Today.” And that “Today” will be culminated on the Last Day, when Christ the King returns in all His glory to raise our bodies and restore all creation as God originally intended it, without sin. Truly, dear Christian, He gives this promise to you today along with the words He once spoke to this thief! Christ has promised it, and according to His promise He will accomplish it. He can do nothing else, for this is the very reason He was born – to save us poor sinners and to procure our soul's salvation. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.