

What to Do When You See a King  
Luke 23:27-43  
November 20, 2016

*A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then “ ‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!” ’ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. Church tradition sets this Sunday aside as Christ the King Sunday. We end the church year by celebrating our Savior as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. However, today’s Gospel reading speaks about a dying king not a triumphant king. This text is from Jesus’ crucifixion. How can we find a victorious king in a man nailed to a cross and dying from suffocation?

This text speaks about the reactions people have when they look at the crucified Jesus. Most of the people laugh at him and mock him. Only one, a thief dying next to him, recognizes him as the King. At first glance, it seems odd to choose this text for a Sunday in which Christ the King is emphasized. But we will see that it is a very good text to show us exactly what kind of King Jesus is.

*The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One”* (Lk 23:35).

Just a few days before, these same people had been in the temple listening carefully to Jesus speak. Now they were watching Jesus die. Perhaps at one time they had thought Jesus was the Messiah. Perhaps they had hoped that he would free them from Roman rule and establish a kingdom on earth. But now that hope was gone.

Instead of leading the people to Jesus as their only King, the religious leaders led them away from Jesus. Instead of using Jesus’ kingly titles to praise him, they used them to

mock him as he was dying.

They said: *He saved others; let him save himself.* By this they meant that he claimed to have saved others from their earthly problems. The Jews weren't thinking of salvation in spiritual terms. They figured that Jesus was suffering the judgment of God; he was dying. How then could he save anyone else? And because Jesus continued to suffer and would not come down from the cross, the rulers were sure he had proven that he was not *the Christ of God, the Chosen One.*

"Christ" means the Anointed One. The Hebrew word is Messiah. The custom of anointing people was common in the Old Testament. The act of anointing showed that God was setting this person aside to do some special work for him. It also meant that God would pour out his Spirit upon this person to give him the power to do this special work. The prophet Samuel anointed David to be king over Israel, and the Spirit of the Lord then came upon David.

In Genesis 3:15 God first promised to send a Savior to save the world from its sins. God's Old Testament people called this Promised One Messiah or Christ, since he was the One whom God had set aside to save his people from their sins. Those people also knew that God would anoint this Christ with the Holy Spirit. God did that at Jesus' baptism.

God had also promised David that this Savior would be one of his descendants. He would be a King who would rule forever. Because of this promise, God's people considered the name Christ to also mean king. So the rulers knew that when the Christ came, he would be a King.

But when they looked at Jesus dying on the cross, they didn't see a King like they expected. So they thought that Jesus couldn't possibly be the Christ. What they didn't understand was, by dying for the sins of all people, Jesus was establishing his spiritual kingdom. Jesus the King had to die, so that we could be members of his kingdom.

The final words of this verse, *the Chosen One*, also was a kingly title. The religious leaders knew that the Messiah had been specially chosen by God *to bring justice to the nations* (Isa 42:1). They knew that God had a special love for his Chosen One (Isa 42:1). They didn't see God showing any love to Jesus while he hung on the cross, so they felt that Jesus wasn't *the Chosen One.*

They didn't understand that the Messiah had been chosen just for this suffering. It was the only way that he could bring justice to the nations (cf. Isa 53:4). In Luke 9:35, God the Father says of Jesus at his transfiguration: *This is my Son, whom I have chosen.*

What were Moses and Elijah talking about with Jesus when the Father said this? They were discussing Jesus' coming death or *departure* at Jerusalem (Lk 9:31). By his suffering Jesus was proving that he was the Chosen One, but the rulers couldn't see that.

Everything that was happening pointed to Jesus as the true King, the Christ, the Chosen One. Even the mocking words of the religious leaders were proof. They didn't know it, but their very words they were fulfilling a prophecy made by David about the coming Messiah: *All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads* (Ps 22:7).

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These verses give us three more examples of the mockery and insults heaped upon Jesus: by the soldiers, by the sign above his head, and by one of the criminals.

The soldiers were the Roman legionaries who had been put in charge of crucifying Jesus. It wasn't enough for them to crucify the Lord of glory, so they decided to add to Jesus' torment by mocking him. First, they offered him the sour cheap wine that was fit only for common soldiers to drink. It was hardly a fitting drink for a King.

Then they mocked him by asking him to prove that he was truly the King of the Jews. They challenged him to save himself by coming down from the cross. But the actions of the soldiers were simply proving that Jesus was the promised Messiah-King. This was all done in fulfillment of the prophecy: *They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst* (Ps 69:21).

The sign above Jesus' head had been put there by order of Pontius Pilate (Jn 19:19). He had probably put it there to mock the Jewish people. The words written on this sign: *This is the King of the Jews*, were Pilate's way of saying, "If you want a king other than Caesar, here he is!"

To the eyes of unbelievers the words on the sign were a cruel joke. Yet they were true. Jesus was the King of the Jews. When we are looking for the truth of God, we need only to look to the cross and see the King.

One of the criminals also joined in the mockery. The question he asks Jesus was meant to make fun of Jesus. "You are the Christ, aren't you? Save yourself and while you're at it, save us too!" Not even a condemned criminal had any respect for Christ the King.

*But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong"* (Lk 23:40-41).

It's the other criminal who finally put an end to the mocking. The text says that he "rebuked" the one who was making fun of Jesus. "Rebuke" means to warn in order to stop someone from doing something. He asked the man whether or not he feared of God. All three of them were under the same sentence of death. All three were soon

going to die. There was only one difference. The criminals were getting the punishment they deserved for their crimes.

Jesus was being punished even though he did not deserve it. Jesus had done nothing wrong. The criminals would soon be standing before the judgment seat of God to answer for the lives they had lived. Still, one of them added to his crimes the sin of insulting the King.

God had brought one of these criminals to repentance. God often uses the fear of death to bring about a fear of him. This criminal knew that he was a sinner, and he was afraid to stand before the judgment seat of God. So he turned in faith to the only One who could save him.

*Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"* (Lk 23:42).

The words of this man are both a cry for help and a beautiful confession of faith. His sins troubled him, but he didn't despair, like Judas did when he hanged himself. In fact, he's the only one in the text who called the Lord by his proper name, his Savior-name, "Jesus."

He asks Jesus, "Remember me." This is a very common prayer which Old Testament believers prayed to God. Remember doesn't mean think about me again. It means turn to me in grace and mercy, or simply, have mercy on me.

In Genesis 8 we read how God remembered Noah and saved him and his family from the flood. In Genesis 19 we read how God remembered Abraham and saved his nephew Lot from the fire which destroyed Sodom. Samson was remembered by God. His eyes had been put out, and he was being mocked by his enemies, the Philistines. But when he prayed, "Remember me," and God answered his prayer by giving him the strength to pull down the pillars which support the temple in which the Philistines were feasting.

This prayer by the dying criminal, "Remember me," means that he understands and believes that Jesus is his God and his Savior.

The criminal's next words completed his prayer and confession of faith *when you come into your kingdom*. Jesus didn't look like any kind of king, much less the King God promised to the world. He looked like a defeated man, laughed at by his enemies. He looked like a criminal who was being put to death.

Yet this criminal believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, the King. He didn't believe what his eyes and human reason told him. He believed the Word of God. He believed the prophecies of the Old Testament which said that the Messiah would suffer

(Isa 53; Ps 22).

Because he believed, he prayed: *Remember me when you come into your kingdom*. He

didn't know exactly when Jesus would display his glory and show the whole world that he was a King. But he knew that there would come a time when Jesus wouldn't be the hidden, suffering King that he was looking at now. This criminal wanted Jesus to mercifully remember him on that day, the Day of Judgment.

*Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise"* (Lk 23:43).

It is the nature of God's love that he answers our prayers by giving us not only what we ask for, but even more, *more than all we ask or imagine* (Eph 3:20). Jesus wanted to give to this man a word he could depend on, a word he could cling to in the face of death. So, Jesus begins: *I tell you the truth*. The criminal had only asked Jesus to have mercy on him on the Day of Judgment, whenever that would be. But Jesus said: *Today you will be with me in paradise*. The criminal's body would be dead and buried, but his soul would be with Jesus in heaven.

The title of today's message is "What to Do When You See a King." When you look at the cross and you see the King of kings, you stand in quiet awe, you bow your head in respect, then you lift your hands to the heavens and praise the King who loved his people enough to die for them.