

LUKE 23:35–43. (EHV)

The people stood watching. The rulers were ridiculing him, saying, “He saved others. Let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, the Chosen One!” The soldiers also made fun of him. Coming up to him, they offered him sour wine, saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription written above him: “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” Jesus said to him, **“Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”**

It probably doesn’t seem strange to any of you that we conclude the church year with a Sunday called Christ the King. The truth that the Son of God and Son of Man is enthroned on high and rules over all—this is a good high point to end on before entering the season of Advent again. What perhaps does seem strange is that we would celebrate Christ the King by looking at Christ on the cross, being mocked and ridiculed, at his lowest and most humiliated.

But when we take a closer look, we see just what a glorious king Christ is, and what a glorious kingdom he has.

While he was on trial, the governor Pontius Pilate had asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” And Jesus had given one of his few answers that night: “Yes, it is as you say.” And some of the soldiers had heard him say it. And it was an accurate claim. Jesus was the king of the Jews. He wasn’t the king most of them were looking for. He wasn’t the king most of them wanted him to be. But he was their king. He had created them. He had chosen them as his own special people. He had come to earth to seek and to save them.

Now here he was, nailed to a cross. Have you ever seen a king like this? People standing around, watching him die? The leaders of his people and the soldiers ridiculing him? A sign posted above his head identifying him as the king of the Jews as a sort of joke? A criminal badmouthing him? And him saying nothing in response to all of this? A king whose closest followers have virtually all abandoned him? A king whose only ally is another crucified criminal hanging next to him? A king being crucified even though he has done nothing wrong? What a king!

Yet listen to the leaders mock him: “He saved others. Let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, the Chosen One!” Even as they mock him, do you hear them acknowledge it? He has actually saved others. They are finally willing to admit it openly, now that they have Jesus where they want him, on death row. He saved the sick, and restored them to health. He saved the lame, and made them to walk. He saved the blind, and gave them sight. He saved lepers and demon-possessed people, and cleansed them. He saved dead people and their grieving, sometimes destitute, loved ones, restoring the dead to life. He saved people crushed by guilt, and forgave them their sins. He saved others, yet he won’t save himself. The rulers challenge him to

do it. The soldiers challenge him to do it. One of the criminals challenges him to do it, and of course throws in that Jesus should save them too. But he doesn't. What a king!

Did the Jewish leaders realize just how clearly and accurately they were identifying this king? This is the king who saves others at his own expense. This is the king who saves others by not saving himself. This is the king who himself said that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. He is undergoing this suffering, this death, to pay for the sins of his people, to pay for the sins of the Jewish leaders mocking him, to pay for the sins of all the Gentiles too, including the soldiers making fun of him.

Have you ever known a king who took service to his subjects so seriously that he was willing to give up his life in a violent death for them? Probably the closest to this was the ancient kings who led their armies into battle and were willing to fight and die for their country. But none of them had to suffer what this king suffered. Death in battle was usually swift, and if it was prolonged, those kings were surrounded by soldiers who would do their best to carry their wounded king to safety and ease his passing, acclaiming him for his bravery and expressing appreciation for his sacrifice until he passed. Not this king. His is a deliberately drawn-out, painful death surrounded mostly by enemies who are mocking him. The few friends who are there are too scared to speak up. Not to mention that this king isn't just suffering physical pain. Since he is suffering for the sins of mankind, he is forsaken by God and is essentially suffering the eternal punishment that billions of people deserve, including you and me, in the span of a few hours. What intense suffering! What a king!

And in spite of all this, when one of the two men crucified with him, a criminal who had spent his life in rebellion against God's will and who earlier had been insulting Jesus along with his fellow criminal, now changes his mind and wants to converse with Jesus, Jesus gives him his undivided attention. He listens to him and responds to him as if there were nothing else happening in the world. Instead of receiving encouragement from others as he passes, he is giving encouragement to others! What a king!

What does the criminal want to converse with Jesus about? As he has listened to and observed Jesus on the cross, has listened to him pray for his enemies, has listened to him call God his own Father, has seen how he has suffered without bitterness, anger, or despair, he has realized that he was wrong to insult this man. He has realized that this man was what the notice said above his head—the king of the Jews, the Messiah. He has realized that this man was his king.

So he not only now rebukes his fellow criminal, who continues to heap insults on Jesus, but after rebuking him, he himself turns to Jesus and prays to him. Now there are some variants in the Greek manuscripts that make it difficult for us to know what exactly he was asking. Some manuscripts have him praying, "Jesus, remember me when you come *into* your kingdom." If this is what the man prayed, then Jesus' kingdom seems to refer to heaven, and this man would be clearly acknowledging that death is not going to be the end for Jesus. He is going to enter into heaven, and is going to enter with power. So the man wants Jesus to remember him when that happens, so that he goes to heaven too.

Other manuscripts have him praying, "Jesus, remember me when you come *in* your kingdom," or "*with* your kingdom." In this case, it would seem that the man is asking Jesus to

remember him on Judgment Day, when he comes with his holy angels, the servants of his kingdom, bringing eternal glory with him. He would essentially be asking Jesus to raise his body from the dead and bring him to glory. Either way, the man is essentially asking that he might inherit heaven, in spite of his life of violent crime.

Jesus's answer is astonishing: "Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise." There is so much in this response. There is of course forgiveness. Jesus once told the parable of the workers in the vineyard, where those hired just one hour before quitting time were paid the same as those hired at the beginning of the day. This is a last-hour conversion if ever there was one, and Jesus is telling this criminal that he will receive the same eternal inheritance as the likes of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. His many sins have been forgiven.

There is knowledge and authority. Crucified criminals didn't usually die the same day they were crucified. Oftentimes they would be left to hang for two or three days before they finally died from any number of causes. But Jesus says that won't be the case with this criminal. His suffering will be at an end by sundown that day. The psalmist says, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to me." Jesus is saying that, in the case of this man, he knows what those days are, because as true God he wrote them down, and this man's last day is going to be today.

And there is glory. Not just: "Today you will be in paradise." That would be good news enough, right? After a life of crime with a disgraceful and painful end, how glorious to be forgiven and to enter a kingdom that is a second Garden of Eden, only better! But would it be paradise without this second detail? "Today you will be *with me* in paradise." There is no paradise without Jesus. His presence is what makes paradise paradise.

But wait! Jesus would also be dead and buried by the end of this day. He won't rise from the dead until Easter Sunday, three days from now. How can he say, "Today you will be with me in paradise"? This king is already announcing his victory over sin, death, and devil to this man. He is already announcing that he will be victorious in the battle he is currently waging. He is already announcing that, though God the Father is forsaking him now, by the time he dies, his mission will have been finished and God's wrath will be satisfied, and he will commend his spirit into God's hands. So even though his body will be dead in the ground, his spirit will continue ruling on high. And this man will join him.

So not just: What a *king*! What a *kingdom*! What a kingdom—where forgiveness is so rich and free, free to us, having been bought for us at the most expensive price by this king! What a kingdom—where joyful hope exists even in the most painful suffering! What a kingdom—where there is victory even in the face of death! What a kingdom—paradise! Paradise with this glorious king!

Even when mocked and ridiculed, even at his lowest and most humiliated, Jesus is a glorious king with a glorious kingdom! So if that was true then, at his lowest and most humiliated, how much more true now, when Jesus is risen and ascended, exalted to God's right hand and enthroned over all nations, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be given, not only in this age, but also in the one to come? If we could say it on Good Friday, we can certainly say it now, no matter what your most recent prognosis from the doctor, no matter how things are going at work, no matter whom you may have recently lost, no matter how great your guilt, no matter how depressing the news was this morning or will be this

evening. It can *always* be said, on this final Sunday of the church year, on the first Sunday of the new church year, every day until Judgment Day, and into all eternity:

What a king! What a kingdom! Amen.