

**Luke 23:35-43 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

Dear Christian Friends,

The theme of this last Sunday in the church year is *Christ the King*. As we look back over the year that has gone by, we know that Jesus Christ was King, ruling in our hearts and controlling all things for our good. And as we look forward to the New Year, we know that Jesus Christ will still be King, giving us confidence and courage in all situations because our King, *the King*, is always with us.

All three of the readings appointed for today describe our King. In our Old Testament reading, Jeremiah records the promise of a shepherd-king who was coming to bring righteousness and justice for the Lord's beleaguered flock. In the Epistle from Colossians, Paul identifies the King as the Son of God - Jesus the Christ - who now rules *over all creation as the head of the body, the Church*. And now we turn our attention to the Gospel reading as Luke presents us with the *KING ON THE CROSS*. And as we take a closer look at just what type of king he is, please join me in prayer...

When you think of a king, perhaps you think of a person dressed in royal robes, sitting on his throne with attendants taking care of his every need. Or maybe a picture pops in your head of a man sitting on his war horse, dressed in armor, gallantly leading his army into battle. But I'm sure that none of our first thoughts is of a man nailed to a cross being mocked by the public...even when we think of Christ the King.

But that's the king that Luke presents us with today. *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.*

They were all mocking Jesus: people, leaders, soldiers, criminals. Oh, they used royal titles like *Christ, Chosen One, King*. But it was all mocking. Pilate even posted that sign above his head *Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum*. He wrote it in Latin so that the entire world could read it and join in the mockery. It simply means, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*.

You can often see this symbol - INRI - on a parament, banner or window. In Latin it reads *Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum*, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. The *I* is the Latin *J*. And so the first *I* stands for Jesus. The *N* stands for Nazareth. The *R* stands for *Rex*, the Latin word for king. And the last *I* stands for Jews. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. But to the eyes of the unbelievers the words on the sign were a foolish joke, even though they spoke the truth. After all, Jesus was the King of the Jews. But since he wasn't the type of king that they had pictured in their minds, they mocked him.

It is tempting to think that *we* wouldn't have been mocking Jesus if we'd been witnesses on that hill called Calvary. But the truth is we mock him every day. Every time we sin, every time we break any of God's commandments, we mock him. Every time we enter into this church to worship the King but leave gossiping about someone, we mock him. Every time we tell the King that we want to be better subjects and lead a more God-pleasing life but then don't take the time to open up a Bible and see how to actually do it, we mock him. Every time we fail to make use of the rich spiritual and physical gifts our King has granted us, we mock him. And for this mockery we are the ones who deserve to be nailed to that cross. We are the ones who deserve to have God forget us.

The thief on the cross recognized it. He said: *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.*" He knew that Jesus was innocent. He knew that he was more than the just *INRI*, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. The thief, the malefactor - the evil-doer - knew Jesus was *INRO* - *Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Omnium* - Jesus of Nazareth, King of Everything. And it was to the King of

Everything that he turned in faith and asked for forgiveness.

**He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Remember me.** This is a very common prayer which Old Testament believers prayed to God. "Remember" does not simply mean "think about me again." Rather it means "turn to me again in grace and mercy," or simply, "have mercy on me."

In **Genesis 8:1** we read how God mercifully "**remembered**" **Noah** and saved him and his family from the flood. In **Genesis 19:29** we read how God mercifully "**remembered**" **Abraham** and saved his nephew Lot from the fire which destroyed Sodom. We also think about **Samson**. His eyes had been put out. He was being mocked by his enemies, the Philistines. He prayed, "**Remember me,**" and God answered his prayer by giving him the strength to pull down the pillars, collapse the pagan temple, and land one final blow against Israel's enemies.

This prayer by the dying criminal, **remember me when you come into your kingdom**, is both a cry for help and a beautiful confession of faith. This prayer shows that he understood and believed that Jesus is God, the Savior, the King of everything. And the King of Everything answered his prayer by saying: "**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.**"

It is so characteristic of God's love for us that he answers our prayers by giving us not only what we ask for, but, as Paul puts it, even **more than all we ask or imagine (Ep 3:20)**. In his response, Jesus gave this man a word he could depend on, a word he could cling to even in the face of death. The thief had simply asked Jesus to have mercy on him on the Day of Judgment, whenever that would be. But Jesus gave him *confidence* - **I tell you the truth** - and *courage* to face the rest of his life - **Today you will be with me in paradise**. Because by the end of the day, the criminal's body would be dead and buried, but his *soul* would be with Jesus in **paradise**.

Ah, **Paradise**. It's a word which typically for us calls to mind the idea of a garden, a beautiful garden, maybe even a

royal garden. It certainly meant a royal garden to the *criminal*. It was in the royal garden of heaven that he would find rest from his suffering, and salvation for his soul. He would forever live in the presence of Jesus, the King. This is sure and certain hope that Jesus gave to a dying sinner that day, and it is the same sure and certain hope that he gives to you and me as we face today and the rest of our time of grace in this world. By his death Jesus has opened that royal garden to us all.

This is extraordinary! I mean, no earthly, no ordinary king does this! Sure, stop by for a visit and see the gardens, but never move in! No, an earthly ruler gathers taxes from his people; Christ the King gave his life for his people. An earthly king demands; Christ the King offers. An earthly King fills his coffers with the treasure of his people; Christ the King generously bestows his spiritual wealth of forgiveness, new life, and salvation *and* abundantly dispenses his physical wealth of talents and time and treasure...all to be put to use in his kingdom by his people according to his will for their benefit and the benefit of generations to come. Yes, Jesus, our King, spared not his own *life* but delivered it up for us all so that we would inherit **paradise**, too. You are forgiven. Heaven is yours. The King has declared it! Now live in joyful anticipation of it!

The tombstone of the great scientist, renowned astronomer and devout Christian, Copernicus, has this inscription, which he himself composed:

*Not the grace of a Paul do I ask for,  
nor for the pardon once shown unto Peter;  
only the forgiveness bestowed upon the  
thief on the cross do I petition.*

Beautiful, huh? Yes, when the scenes of this earth fade from our mortal vision, may our eyes be fixed on Christ as our only hope and comfort. May our lips whisper the heartfelt petition, **Lord, remember me and take me into your kingdom**. For the same cheering and precious response from your King will greet you: **I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise. AMEN.**