

End Time 4C – Christ the King – Luke 23:35-43  
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New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church – Shoreview, MN  
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Dear Friends in Christ,

Common advice to people trying to figure out life is this: Don't try and be someone you're not. *Genuine* and *authentic* are buzz words in a society whose most egregious accusation is *hypocrite*. At first glance, today's Gospel reading may seem a bit misplaced - a portion of Scripture we'd expect to hear during Lent or on Good Friday. After all, it is from Luke account of Jesus' crucifixion. But as we conclude the church year this morning, we turn our attention to these words from Luke. Because, though seemingly out of place and reeking with accusations of hypocrisy, we honor *Christ...a King?*

Luke begins, *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!'*" I probably don't have to tell you where we are. We're at a location outside Jerusalem, known as the "Place of the Skull," or, in the language of the day, "Golgotha." It is the day we have come to call Good Friday.

Just a few days earlier the people had been in the temple listening to Jesus and hanging on His every word. He was their great hope then. *Maybe* he was the one, they thought, who would restore Israel to the status of a great nation. *Maybe* he was the one to lead them out from under the foreign domination of Rome. And with every "*maybe*" their hopes got higher. That was then. Now it was different. Now they saw him as a disappointing and dying failure.

And the religious rulers led the ridicule. They had heard his talk about salvation and how he had come into the world to save sinners. They had heard him and others make the claim that he was nothing less than the Messiah – the One

chosen by God to do a great work. They understood exactly what he had said...but they didn't comprehend it. So now they throw it all back in his face. They turned titles of truth and proclamations of praise into declarations of derision. And they weren't the only ones...

*"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!'"* Yes, three *more* examples of disrespect...

First, from the Roman soldiers. Today we'll often hear about the importance of men being sensitive and compassionate. Not these guys. In their line of work, sensitivity was not in the job description and compassion was excess baggage. Their offer of wine vinegar (the Greek word indicates this was the sour, cheap wine fit only for common soldiers to drink) was neither an act of kindness nor a semi-sympathetic offer of a narcotic. It was another taunt. "Hey king, try this not-so-royal drink!" was what they meant. And then, mockingbird-like, they repeat the ridicule of the Jewish leaders.

Pontius Pilate also gets in on the act. He's the one behind the sign tacked on the cross. It was a double barreled shot against both Jesus and the Jews, with whom he shared a mutual dislike. Again, the point to be made was: This pathetic man hanging on the cross is a king?

But perhaps the greatest lack of respect came from what would seem to be the most unlikely place: one of the criminals. One would have thought that there would have been some semblance of misery loves company. Oh no, he also

lashed out at Jesus to save himself and those hanging on crosses with him.

Finally, however, the disrespect and mockery are confronted, but from an unexpected direction... ***“But the other criminal rebuked [the mocking criminal]. ‘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.’”***

It is significant to note that in Matthew and Mark’s account of the crucifixion we are told that in the beginning hours *both* criminals heaped insults on Jesus. But something happened to one of them. A transformation took place. Maybe it was after he heard Jesus ask his Father to forgive those who nailed him to the wood. Maybe it was the instinctive understanding of a hardened man that Jesus didn’t belong there...

Whatever the case may have been, there on the cross, hours away from death, one of the criminals is brought to faith. This man knew he was a sinner and was, no doubt, afraid to stand before the judgment seat of God. So he turned in faith to the only One who could save him. And as an indication that he took his new faith seriously, he rebuked the other criminal who was making fun of *his* Lord.

***“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”***

This man knew to be true what all the others in our text thought to be ridiculous. Jesus was and is a king. The world saw a humble, defeated and dejected shell of a man minutes from death. But through the eyes of faith, this new believer saw his Savior...he saw his King.

There is an important lesson we can learn from this thief: *Although Jesus Christ is misunderstood, misinterpreted, misread and mocked by many, he nevertheless IS the King of kings and Lord of lords.*

The people in our text mocked and ridiculed Jesus because they didn’t understand who he was and what he was all about. They didn’t understand that he was on that cross by his own choice as an integral part of God’s plan for their eternal salvation. They only saw him as being weak and powerless and unlike any other king. After all, they thought, if he has all that horsepower under his hood, why doesn’t he use it to better his situation or those of his followers?

Many today think along the same lines. Sometimes even Christians, even *we*, wonder why God lets certain things happen, especially if they aren’t good. *If God is so powerful, why doesn’t he step in and stop wars and famines and cancer and terrorism and the host of other evils that rear their ugly head in our world?* And the moment we ask that we join those mockers, hurling our insults at Jesus. Really, the essential question asked by us mockers today and those at the cross is: If God is so great, why doesn’t he *do* something?

He did. He came down to earth. Not as the king he is but in humility, in poverty, in meekness. He came joining himself to his fallen creation, uniting himself as the everlasting God to the human race by his incarnation through Mary. Though he commands myriad angels, he not only bore the sin of the world within his innocent self, but he allowed that world to hang him on a cross and place him in a tomb.

What an amazing thing this is! The God of heaven became a man! The human mind cannot begin to comprehend the miracle of love that brought eternity into time, heaven into earth, deity into humanity. This is God’s own answer to the greatest need of all people: a Savior. A Savior who would redeem a world of sinful humanity with a sacrifice that atones for every sin of every man, woman, and child.

It is this sacrifice that has changed everything for you. Your sin, too, was nailed to his cross. Your guilt, too, was placed upon this innocent God-man, and his righteousness was placed upon you. The sentence of death that you and I have so richly earned was fully paid by Jesus. And yet the story does not end with death, but with life. For the same innocent Jesus who entered death for you also destroyed death by his glorious rising again on Easter morning.

How humbly this King came...and how humbly he still comes to us. Not with the glory and pomp that is his by right, but gently and lovingly in the water of your Baptism, quietly and humbly in the gracious meal of his altar! Not with words that destroy, but with words that bring life, words that say so sweetly, *Your sins are forgiven.*

Ah, what a King! Not like any king we know on earth. And that's because he's first and foremost a *spiritual* king. Like Jesus said to Pontius Pilate: "***My kingdom is not of this world.***" His and ours is a *spiritual* kingdom. And he assures us, his subjects: "***In this world you are going to have trouble. But be courageous! I have overcome the world.***" (John 16:33) And now our greatest assurance in life is that we live each day under the watchful eye of Christ the King, and will eventually, like that criminal on the cross, be welcomed to our King's eternal home to reign with him forever. Soldiers, crowds, criminals may have mocked him then, the mockery continued to this day, but this day and every day, we "*crown him with many crowns*" as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords even as you long for the day when he says to you, ***Today, you will be with me in paradise.*** Welcome home. **Amen.**