

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him.²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,²⁹ and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said.³⁰ They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again.³¹ After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matthew 27:27-31)

Hail, King of the Jews!

I read this week that officials in Washington are expecting record crowds for President Obama's inauguration next month. Perhaps as many as four million people will flood the capital. And they will see American pomp and circumstance at its finest. There will be the traditional inauguration parade. Some 250,000 people will get tickets for special seating – presumably close to where the ceremony will take place. The rest of the crowd will pack the national mall. I expect the whole thing to be carried on television not just in the U.S. but throughout the world. You can bet that commentators will be using words like "historic" and "new era" and "leader of the free world." All that pomp and circumstance reflects longstanding practices. Since ancient times, rulers have celebrated the day they took office amid the cheering of the crowds. But does the size of the crowd really indicate the greatness of the leader? It can. But many dictators and tyrants have marched to cheering crowds. Sometimes the most deserving people never get the recognition they have coming. This morning, we have before us the most deserving person in all of history. But we don't see the crowds cheering for him, although that had happened in his lifetime. We see instead mockery and torture and coming death.

I.

After Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to die, the soldiers took him into the Praetorium – the palace and military command post – to have a little fun with him. Now he had already been scourged, so he was probably covered with blood. Now, they added insult to injury. These men knelt and shouted, "**Hail, King of the Jews!**" **What horrible mockery!**

Why did they do that? There are many reasons and they all begin with the natural human enjoyment of another person's suffering. Does that surprise you? I mean, we're horrified by cruelty, right? I hope we are. But I think that it's telling how many movies and even TV shows today depict torture to entertain us. It's telling how many high school and middle school students are tormented until they bring guns to school. Even in a Lutheran elementary school, our teachers have to deal with children being cruel to each other. People are naturally mean. We have to teach our children to put themselves in the place of a person who's suffering from their cruelty.

When there are excuses for it, it's even easier to be cruel. The Romans engaged in a policy of deliberate cruelty. They were conquerors. They were outnumbered in their empire and if everyone had risen up against them at once, they couldn't possibly have held onto to all their far flung possessions. So they ruled by force and by fear. When you defied Roman authority, you suffered. Israel was one of the most defiant corners of their empire. So the troops there were particularly practiced in cruelty and violence. The truth is, the soldiers there hated the people they ruled over. The Jews spoke a different language. They worshipped different gods. And the ancient world knew nothing of our modern embracing of diversity. To the Romans, the Jews were inferior and troublesome and dangerous. They enjoyed getting their licks in.

Jesus had been brought to them as a revolutionary – as someone who claimed to be the king of these rebellious Jews. So they mocked him as a king. Kings wear crowns, so they took branches with thorns on them and they wove a crown out of them and shoved it onto Jesus' head. They found a robe – probably a tattered soldier's robe – but a robe like conquering Roman generals wore. They stripped Jesus' own clothes off and draped that robe on him. They stock a reed in his hand to be his scepter and then they knelt and shouted, "Hail, king of the Jews!"

How many people do you supposed participated in this spectacle? We'd like to believe that it was limited to just a few particularly sick individuals, wouldn't we? But Matthew says that they "**gathered the whole company of soldiers around him.**" The Greek word that he used ordinarily means a command of 600 men. So don't think of just a few guards yucking it up when no one was watching. This was a crowd mocking

him and taking turns grabbing that reed out of his hands and hitting him with it. He must have been covered with spit and nearly deafened with the noise.

This is how Roman soldiers treated political prisoners. But Jesus was no ordinary political prisoner. In fact, he wasn't interested in Roman politics at all. He didn't come to overthrow their empire. All that the Romans were doing was misguided. But it was not totally in the dark. It was a mockery of reality. That crown of thorns was a mockery. But the head that wore it deserved a crown – a greater crown than any crown ever made on this earth. The robe, the scepter, the kneeling, the hailing, all were twisted reflections of reality. Because Jesus really was the king. Not just of the Jews, he was the king of the universe. He was the ruler who could've sent those Roman soldiers to hell with a thought. But Jesus hid his real crown behind a crown of thorns. Jesus hid his true glory behind mockery and spitting and cruel imitations of the honor he deserved. Why? Do I really need to say it? You already know the answer. Jesus suffered this cruelty for us.

The mockery didn't begin in that courtyard and it didn't end there either. But Jesus let it happen there and all the night before and for the rest of that day because he was paying for us. We are sinners. Our sin deserves the kind of treatment Jesus got. God should ladle mockery and sarcasm on us. Does that sound horrible and unworthy of God? I can understand why you would feel that way and I did not say God would treat us with sinful cruelty. But when we stand before God and claim that we're good people and claim that our pitiful efforts at being good should get us into heaven, God should mock our pride and our arrogance. He should slam us down into our place. He should trot out all the times when we've been cruel to each other – all the times, we brothers and sisters have insulted or hurt our siblings, all the times we school children embarrassed and tormented the easy target in our classroom, all the times we parents lost our tempers and punished our children, not to teach them right from wrong but to vent our anger. God should bring out his footage of every cruel word we've ever spoken, and every evil thought we've ever had, of every feeling of contempt that ever entered our hearts. And he should mock us for thinking that we're good enough to enter heaven. Then he should send us to hell.

That's what we deserve. But God turned all the mockery and cruelty we have coming on Jesus. When he endured sinful mockery and humiliation from those hate-filled Roman soldiers, he was stepping into our place. He didn't deserve any of it and he could've stopped it all at any time. But he knew we deserve it all and more. He took everything that we have coming. He took the wrath of God for us. That makes this moment of torture a moment of pure glory because Jesus was there out of love. Jesus hid his power and his glory and his righteous anger over our sins behind his love. He stood there and took it all for you and for me.

II.

Those Roman soldiers cried, **“Hail, King of the Jews!”** What wonderful love! Not from them, but from Jesus. That's what this reading is really about – the love of Christ. That isn't just anybody's love. It's the love of the real King. Today is the last Sunday of the church year. We call it Christ the King Sunday because we are celebrating the reign of Christ. That reign began on that Friday 2,000 years ago when Jesus suffered all this and more for us.

Now, in one sense of course, Jesus was already the King. He is God the Son. He was and is the ruler of the universe. But practically speaking, for you and me, he was a law King. He was a King who enforces justice and judgment. That's still Jesus' role. On Judgment Day, Jesus is going to be the judge. For you and me, that's a good thing, because the Savior who was willing to be mocked and die for us is the Savior who will call us his brothers and sisters and bring us to everlasting life. But for all those who hate him or who just don't believe in him, for all those who figure they're good enough and they deserve heaven, Jesus will be terrible to behold. Without flinching, without hesitating, without even sadness, Jesus will condemn them to hell forever. They will lose all of God's love and be locked out, in darkness and flames, in loneliness and separation from God forever.

Jesus had that kingship before he ever was born in Bethlehem. God is holy and God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit demand holiness from us. If Jesus hadn't come to Bethlehem, then all he would be is our judge. And we would live in terror of facing him. But the gospel is the story of Jesus winning a different kind of kingship: the kingship of grace. Jesus' greatest achievement was taking our place. Jesus won his greatest victory by letting sinners spit on him and mock him and smack him in the head with a reed. Jesus earned eternal praise by letting those unbelievers ridicule him and nail him to a cross where he suffered hell itself and then died for us. Throughout the New Testament, there are songs of praise to Jesus. Over and over again,

those songs praise the one who was slain and now lives again. Jesus won a kingdom and eternal glory at the cross, where these same Roman soldiers took him when their fun was over. Where they drove nails through his hands and feet and suspended him from the crossbar. Where they stood guard and divided his clothing.

What drove Jesus to that cross? No human court could've done that. No army on earth could've made Jesus submit to that death. No power of man or of hell had any hold on him. Only love could nail Jesus there. What does love drive you and me to do? In a few years, my teenage daughter is going to start driving. I remember when I first began to drive. I remember my parents clinging to the dashboard for dear life. I remember my mom involuntarily stomping on a break that wasn't there when she rode next to me. I remember when my dad bought the first new car he had purchased in many years – and I wrecked it not once, but twice the summer I got my drivers license. Yet my parents continued to allow me to drive. They continued to teach me and work with me. Why? Love drives us to make sacrifices. I hope I love my children that much.

Only love could hold the Son of God on the cross. God's love is greater than any human love that we will ever know. The love of God the Father sent his only begotten Son to die and save us. The love of Jesus caused him to enter the womb of the Virgin Mary to rescue us. It drove him for 33 years until he stood there in the courtyard and endured abuse and torture and then he picked up his cross and carried it out to the Calvary. His own all consuming love put Jesus where God's anger should put us – in hell. God the Father abandoned him on the cross and that is the essence of hell. Then love drove Jesus to die.

Three days later, God's love conquered even death. Jesus rose. God gave us the proof that the love of Christ is greater than our sin. It's greater than hell. It's greater than the devil or our own sinful hearts. Jesus won us. The love of Holy Spirit packaged that love in the gospel – the only way that we can know or believe what Jesus has done. Now because of that love in the gospel, we are a part of his people. In this life, we serve him. In the life to come, we will live with him in his kingdom and we will celebrate his victory for all eternity.

Jesus is the greatest King who has ever lived. Today is Christ the King Sunday. Doesn't it seem like this should be a very important church holiday? So, do you think we'll set a record for church attendance today? I doubt it. I doubt that anywhere in the world, record crowds will flock to hear the gospel today. Even if we talk about Thanksgiving next week, or Christmas next month, or Easter next spring, there's no reason to expect that this year we will see record numbers of people coming to hear God's word. But the day is coming when Jesus will set an unbreakable record. On Judgment Day, every person who has ever died will rise and join with every person still alive and welcome Jesus. All people will praise him. Then Jesus will sit on the throne of Judgment and send the devil and all his angels to hell. He will condemn those who did not believe in him. Then he will cast sin and death into hell as well. And we will live in his perfect kingdom forever. Look forward to that day! Amen.