

*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.”*

<sup>36</sup> *The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar <sup>37</sup> and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”*

<sup>38</sup> *There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

<sup>39</sup> *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

<sup>40</sup> *But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*

<sup>42</sup> *Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

<sup>43</sup> *Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:35-43)*

### Did Jesus Look Like a King?

Have you ever looked at a sign and thought to yourself, “No way!”? For years, my wife and I have been looking for a German restaurant that makes real, authentic German dishes. And in our area here, there is one that’s very popular. We’ve gone to it a couple of times and the food is good. It’s just not really like the food you get if you go to a *Gasthaus* in Germany, so we found it to be disappointing. They have a billboard on I-96 advertising their German food and every time I pass it, I think to myself, “Another disappointing German restaurant.” Now, you might disagree with me and that’s fine, but have you ever had the experience of seeing a sign that advertised something, and you just didn’t believe it? At least some of the people in our gospel lesson for today had that experience when they read the sign that Pontius Pilate posted over Jesus’ cross: **“This is the King of the Jews.”** I think we can understand why they felt that way. When you consider that today, the last Sunday of the church year is called Christ the King, you might feel that this is an odd choice of a reading because it doesn’t show Jesus on a throne. It doesn’t show him in the all the glory of heaven or judging the world. It shows him dying. The only indication that he’s a king is that sign that Pilate put up there. At that moment, **did Jesus look like a king?**

#### I.

**Did Jesus look like a king when they mocked and killed him?** This lesson shows how humiliating crucifixion actually was. For us, dying is terrible. But it isn’t always shameful. Lots of soldiers and police officers and firemen and even ordinary people have died heroic deaths. But that’s not what Luke describes for us this morning. He speaks of an execution. And not just any execution, but the most shameful and painful death that the Romans could come up with.

It started by parading him out of the city with two other criminals to the place of public execution. Today, when we execute someone, it’s a very private affair. Usually, the state will allow only selected witnesses. But in the past, executions were public events and crowds gathered to see them. And they leered at the person being killed. There was no dying with dignity. The Romans soldiers stripped Jesus nearly naked and then, while he was hanging there, still alive, they divided up his clothing. They didn’t ask him if they could have it. They just took it. They didn’t even have the decency to wait until he at least passed out.

You can see how humiliating it all was in the succession of people who mocked Jesus. Luke says, **“The rulers even sneered at him,” “The soldiers also came up and mocked him,”** and **“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him.”** And what did they say? **“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”** Do you see a theme? What kind of king would be hung there for the whole world to see? Even a human king should have someone to fight for him, but everyone there understood that the King of the Jews was supposed to be more than just an ordinary king. He was supposed to be the Chosen One, the Christ, the Messiah. It shouldn’t be possible for him to be humiliated like that. So they mocked him and in essence said, **“Prove it! Come down off that cross if you’re really the promised Savior and the eternal King of Israel!”**

Of course, he didn't. Jesus didn't reveal his glory that day. He didn't let the soldiers who dragged him out of the city and nailed him to that cross see the blazing light that his disciples saw on the mountain during his transfiguration. He didn't do a miracle to silence those leaders of the Jews the way he had silenced them in argument after argument. He didn't even strike fear into the heart of the criminal mocking Jesus from his own cross. Jesus just hung there and took it. Isaiah had said, **“As a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”**

But, my friends, that prophecy is the key: in hiding his glory as the Son of God, Jesus was revealing his glory as the promised Savior. Isaiah had prophesied a man of sorrows, who would be despised and rejected, who would lay down his life to save his people. That's what Jesus was doing that day. He was doing the job that a king is supposed to do. Sometimes we forget that. God invented government. And he gives all kings a job: to take care of the people they rule, to protect them and provide justice for them – to save them from their enemies and even from themselves. They are supposed to sacrifice themselves and their own good for the good of the people they govern. Human kings are supposed to do that in an earthly setting and an earthly way. But every time God calls Jesus a king, he's using that worldly job to remind us of the greater spiritual job that Jesus came to do.

There on the cross Jesus was fighting our fight and winning our eternal life. And to do that, he had to stand in our place and suffer the punishment we deserve. Why do we deserve it? Because left to ourselves, we would be just as willing to mock Jesus as those leaders and soldiers and that criminal were. You don't believe me? Well, consider this: every sin we commit is really a sin against the first commandment, “you shall have no other gods before me” because gave us all those other commands. Every time we lose our temper with our spouse, every time we lie or cheat or fail to show love to the people around us, every time we put our faith last and our selfishness first, we are mocking God and all that he commanded us to do and to be. Worse, we are mocking Jesus himself, because we're Christians. We're supposed to be the followers of the Christ, the true King of Israel. Every time our sinful desires come first, we are heaping scorn up on the head of the one who died to save us.

But he did die to save us. He suffered hell itself so we won't have to. He did what a true King is supposed to do: he sacrificed himself so that we will live. That's what it means that he is the Christ, the Chosen One of God. He was the only one who could do that. He was the only one who could step off the throne of heaven and endure all this so that we will live. When he humbled himself, he did something extraordinary: he took the people he found down here and he adopted us into God's family. He made us royalty by getting down into the dirt and mud of life and death in a sinful world with us. So, maybe he didn't look like a king on the cross. But he absolutely was the greatest King of all.

## II.

Of course, Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He rules all things as our King and when he returns, the whole world will see it. He will sit on his throne and judge the world and then we will live with him in his kingdom forever. But that return still lies in the future. The reign in heaven is real, but it's often hidden behind suffering and losses here. It's behind things like jobs and doctors and parents and all the other things that God uses to provide for us while we're here. It's even hidden behind the gospel that God works through. But there are two times in this gospel lesson where Jesus shows that he is the King. Did you see them? It's easy to miss them because Jesus appears in this reading as a prisoner being executed. Does the blood that covered him and the soldiers who guarded him and all the mockery that was going on all around him make it hard for us to see him acting like a king here? **Did Jesus look like a king when he pardoned and promised eternal life?**

Maybe not like a king on his throne, but twice in this lesson, Jesus did something only a king can do. The first time was right at the beginning. When the soldiers crucified Jesus, he said, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”** Now, it's true that Jesus phrased it as a prayer to his Father, but this is the Son of God asking. And he's claiming a power that only a ruler has: the power to pardon. Even the US constitution gives that power to the president and most governors have the power in their state constitutions. Consider what it means: the chief executive can set aside the work of a judge and a jury. He can void the punishment that the legal system imposed. Once he does it, it can't be undone. So if a president pardons a murderer or a child molester, that person goes free, even if the whole country thinks he or she should rot in jail.

When the Son of God pardons us, he sets us free from hell. He sets us free from all the guilt of our sins, from all judgment even in God's court. He sets us free even from death, although we might not experience that freedom until we rise on the last day. But nothing can undo that pardon. No matter how much Satan rages, no matter how many people hate us and think we deserve hell, no matter how many times our own consciences force us to admit that they're right, we do deserve it – Jesus pardoned us. When he pardoned the soldiers who drove nails through his hands and feet and hung him up to die a death that was so horrible we can't even imagine it, he was claiming the right to pardon all people. He was claiming the right to pardon you and me. That is what it means to us that Jesus is our King.

The other time Jesus acted like a king that day was at the end of our reading. Only one man defended Jesus. One group after another got their licks in and said the most vicious thing they could think of. When, finally, that criminal mocked Jesus and told him to rescue himself and them, the other criminal said, **“Don't you fear God, 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.”** Now, the humiliation is still there: the only person willing to speak for Jesus was a dying criminal. Everyone else was still laughing. But then that man who was clearly at the bottom of Jewish society made a request: **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** In the ancient world, every person had the right to approach their ruler and ask for his help. That's what this man did. He came to Jesus as his king and asked for a blessing in the life to come.

He knew where he would see Jesus ruling. He knew what that would mean for him. And Jesus then acted as a king. He granted one of his own citizens the gift he asked for. Jesus, **“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”** Only the Lord of heaven and earth could grant that request. And Jesus made that promise so that this man could endure the hours of pain that lay before him and die in faith. That very day, he entered eternal life. He did what so many of our loved ones have already done. He did what we will do when our time on this earth ends. Jesus makes the same promise to us because we are his people, too. On the day we die, we will be with him in paradise. If he comes back before we die, we still get the paradise. That is what our king has granted us. When a king makes a grant like that, there is no power in the kingdom to undo it. There is no power in the world that can take away what Jesus gave us.

Signs can be confusing. We don't always believe them. But that doesn't mean we're always right. I mentioned that German restaurant before. Some of you might know which one I'm talking about and you might vehemently disagree with me about it. A lot of people clearly like it. Pontius Pilate put up a sign on Jesus' cross, a sign that many people found offensive on that day. But that sign was true: This is the King of the Jews. Today, you and I are part of Jesus' royal family. Today, we have a perspective that Pontius Pilate could never see: we know Jesus. And we look forward to that day when we will live and reign with him forever. Until that day comes, we trust that the Savior who endured all this pain and sorrow for us, is now ruling all things for our good. The same love that drove him to that cross, drives him to care for us and protect us and bring us home. Trust him today and always. Amen.