

November 25, 2007
Christ the King

Pastor Russell Lackey
Reformation L.C.
Luke 23:33-43

The King of Forgiveness

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. **34**Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. **35**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." **36**The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar **37**and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." **38**There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. **39**One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" **40**But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? **41**We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." **42**Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." **43**Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

What kind of king is Jesus?

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is a day when we celebrate the awesome reality that Jesus Christ is King. The question this morning is simple: what kind of king is Jesus? The answer might surprise you.

When I think of kings different thoughts come to mind. Kings are unapproachable. They sit on royal thrones within royal palaces. Common people do not have access to kings. Those who do must go through protocol just to interact with the king or queen. Babe Ruth committed a major blunder when he had the chance to meet King George of Britain. Instead of bowing, he extended his hand and said, "How you doing King?"

Kings are ordained by God. You do not vote for a king. You cannot fire a king. The only way to remove a king is either by his abdicating the throne or death. Kings speak decrees that must be followed. When a king says bow, you bow. When a king says you are a knight, you are a knight. Kings protect their subjects. The people submit themselves to the king and in return the king protects them. It sounds a lot like the mafia or the ELCA.

With Jesus, everything is different. He does not fit the mold. Kings want power. Jesus gave up power. Kings are born in golden palaces. Jesus was born in a lowly manger. Kings ride war horses. Jesus rode a donkey. Kings wear purple robes. Jesus wore only one purple robe – the day he was mocked and beaten. Jesus is the not the typical king.

In Luke 23, we see what kind of king Jesus truly is; he is a forgiving king. Verses 33-34: "When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Notice what Jesus did not say. Jesus did not say, "You faithless disciples. You left me when the going got tough." Jesus did not say, "You ungrateful people. I healed your diseases and this is how you treat me by nailing me to the cross?" Jesus did not say, "When God raises me from the dead, I am going to send all of you to hell." Jesus could have said any of these things. Jesus would have been justified in saying all of these things. Instead, while suspended in the air between heaven and earth, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Forgiveness has been Jesus' modus operandi from the beginning. In his first sermon in Nazareth, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim pardon (literally, forgiveness) for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19). Later, Jesus forgave Peter (5:1-11), the paralytic (5:20-24), and the sinful woman (7:47). In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (11:4). Before he ascended into heaven Jesus told his disciples, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47). Forgiveness is at the heart of his ministry.

This should not surprise us. Forgiveness is also at the heart of God. Isaiah 43:25: "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." Isaiah 65:16-17: "For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes. Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. Jeremiah 32:34: "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This is amazing; the God who always remembers His covenant is the very one who forgets our sins. He who knows all things cannot and will not remember the sins He has forgiven. He simply hides them from His eyes. He does not let them come to mind. They are forgotten. He doesn't remember them. That is why the prophet Micah was able to say, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18-19). God forgives and forgets.

How different it is with us! When someone sins against us, we can't forget. We have eternal memories when it comes to the faults of others. We all have harbored grudges against those who have offended us. We are quick to take offense but slow to forgive. When it comes to the sins of others, our memories are perfect. A wife can remember every time her husband has looked at another woman. A husband can remember every time she has nagged him. A sister remembers every single time her big brother bullied her, while he remembers every time she got on his nerves. We do not forget the sin against us.

When it comes to our own sins, however, we suddenly develop total amnesia. We can't remember our own faults. We go through life assuming that all our problems are caused by others. We are oblivious to our own sin. If the wife is mad at us, it must be because she woke up on the wrong side of the bed. If a friend is mad at us it must be because it is always about him. It cannot be about us. We are quick to remember others' sin, but slow to remember our own sin.

Praise God, Jesus is not like us. Jesus is a patient and forgiving king. We see this patience as he was mocked. First the religious leaders mock him, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One" (23:35). Next the soldiers mock him: "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself" (23:37). The sign above his head was meant to mock Jesus: "This is the king of the Jews"

(23:38). And finally the criminal next to Jesus hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (23:39). Oh, Jesus' divine patience. Instead, of asking for vengeance he asked God to forgive them.

There is one person who heard these words and took them to heart. The other criminal next to Jesus, knew his sin and cried out, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." What a statement of faith. He has no works to point to. He has no religion to cling to. Instead, he can only say, "Jesus, remember me." If we could have such faith!

Jesus does not wait a second to respond. Immediately, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Today, your sins are forgiven. Today, you will be in paradise. Not next week, not next month, but today.

It is fitting that the first person absolved from the cross is a criminal. By this Jesus is showing that his kingdom is meant for sinners. "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). It is also fitting that Jesus would speak of paradise from the cross. As the Small Catechism reminds us, "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation." "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

What kind of king is Jesus? Jesus is a forgiving king. If the story ended here, it would be amazing. Jesus would have forgiven his killers. But the story does not end here. Jesus is no mere man. Jesus is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. Jesus is the Son of God. There is a deeper magic at work here.

God raised Jesus from the dead, and placed him on the throne. "God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him head over all things" (Ephesians 1:22). In doing this, God vindicated Jesus. Humanity could not take away Jesus' throne. Even more, by vindicating Jesus as king, God vindicated the kind of King Jesus is. Jesus truly is a good and loving king who forgives.

Now, just because Jesus is willing to forgive, does not mean he is soft. Jesus has the power of heaven and earth. He uses his power against his enemies: sin, death, and the devil. "For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son, in whom we have redemption, forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

We are not his enemies. We are his people. He has declared it so. In the waters of Baptism, our king has said, you are mine, you are a keeper. At the table, through bread and wine, God has decreed the forgiveness of sins for you. When the King of kings and Lord of lords declares: "You are forgiven," you are truly forgiven!

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing. I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

**In Jesus' Name,
Amen**