

Luke 23:27-43

The Scripture readings for the Last Sunday of the Church Year used to focus on the end of the world. That was in the past. It seems that times have changed. It appears that we have jumped from the last Sundays of the Church Year to Lent, more specifically to Good Friday. The Gospel reading before us is not the end of the world; it's the end of Holy Week. Jesus is on the cross. How strange! Because next Sunday--the First Sunday in Advent--we look forward to Jesus' birth at Christmas.

But it's only strange if we misunderstand the theme of these Sundays in late November. The Church Year begins, as it will next Sunday, with the cry of the prophet, "*Behold, your King is coming to you!*" And the Church Year ends where we began--with Christ as King. And as King, Jesus is seated on His throne. Not a royal throne in heaven. Not even a majestic looking throne here on earth. The King of kings and Lord of lords chose for His throne an ugly wooden cross. This is your King...the man hanging in the air, suspended, nailed to a cross. And on this day, before another year in the church comes to a close, your King would speak to you. "*He who has ears, let him hear.*"

There was an inscription above Jesus: "*This is the king of the Jews.*" Pilate put it there. They told him not to, but he did it anyway. Was Jesus Pilate's king? Pilate would have said no. "*The king of the Jews,*" he wrote. Pilate gave the order for a king to be crucified. But the man was not his king. His king lived in a palace. His king would never be hung from a tree.

But even the Jews did not claim Jesus as their king. They did not want the inscription. "*We have no king but Caesar!*" they yelled. Jesus was not their king. He was not Pilate's king. Then whose king was He? There were soldiers there. Was He their king? But they were Romans. And Romans were not in the habit of mocking and crucifying their king. They, too, paid homage only to Caesar. There were two thieves nailed to crosses next to Jesus. What about them, was He their king? But who wants to be a king of thieves? There is no honor in that. And they had just met. Not formally. They just happened to be crucified at the same time.

One thief mocks Jesus. At first they both did, but one continues. Jesus was hardly his king. The man did not want a king. All he wanted was someone to save him from crucifixion so he could go out and steal again. But the other thief was different. The words that Jesus spoke affected him very much. He repented of his sinful life. He turned to the other thief and rebuked him for mocking Jesus, for blasphemy. And then he turned to Jesus and hailed Him as his king. "*When you come in your kingdom,*" he said, "*remember me.*"

That was a very bold thing to say. This criminal was asking Jesus for a place in His kingdom. As if he had done anything to earn such a place! As if there was room in Jesus' kingdom for thieves! But this dying thief said what he said, asked what he asked, because he had faith. He did not have works. He had nothing in his past to point to and say, "Remember that I was good once." No. He had nothing but sin in his past. But this day, as he hung on a cross, he was given something greater than works, something greater than a past life to be proud of. Through the hearing of Jesus' words, this man was given the gift of faith. And so he cried with hope and confidence, "*Jesus (Savior), remember me in your kingdom.*"

It doesn't matter who you are. Someone who has been a Christian your entire life. Someone who just recently became a Christian. Someone who has been an on and off Christian...maybe more off than on. What matters is Jesus. If you see Him as a King, as the King of kings and Lord of lords, as the Creator of the world, as the God who was crucified for all, then you are in the same company as

Pilate, the Jews, and the soldiers. They all saw Jesus as king, just not their king. Jesus can be the greatest king of all, but if He is not your king, you have no place in His kingdom.

“But I’m not like Pilate,” you say. “I’m not like the Jews and the soldiers. They did not claim Jesus as their king, but I do. Jesus is my king. I am His subject. I have a place in His kingdom.” If Jesus is your king, then why do you live as if He was not? Why do you disobey Him? Why do you not listen very well when He speaks? I know these things are true of you, because they are true of me. We claim Jesus for our king, and then we go out and crown ourselves king. We obey our sinful desires, not the just decrees of God. We listen to our inner voice more than we listen to the Word of God. We say Jesus is our king, but much of the time those who watch us would never know it.

My friends, Jesus is your king not because you act like He is, but because He does. As your king, He demands that you live perfectly, and because you fail, He lives a holy life for you. As your king, Jesus sentences all lawbreakers to die, and because you are a lawbreaker, He dies for you. Jesus is not ashamed to be the king of thieves, and adulterers, gossipers, and murderers. These are the ones He calls into His kingdom. Not the righteous, but sinners. Not the proud, but the humble. Not a thief who refused to repent, but a thief who had nothing but sin in his life, and yet believed that Jesus, his king, was dying for him. There was nothing about that man that made him worthy of a place in Jesus’ kingdom. His whole life was lived in sin. He lived every day with himself as king. But Jesus, from His throne, became this man’s king. Jesus claimed him. Jesus accepted him. Jesus forgave him.

Friend, Jesus is your king in the same way. He does not look at your past life--at your sins or at the good you are proud of. Jesus calls you to repent, to take the crown off your own head and see that His head is crowned with thorns for you. Jesus is your king because of what He does for you, not because of what you do, or do not do, for Him. He baptizes you into His death and resurrection. He claims you there in those holy waters. He accepts you. He forgives you. And He crowns you, not to be your own king...He crowns you, as He crowned the dying thief, with the promise of Paradise. You have a place in Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus, by His death and resurrection, purchased a place for you. Why? Because He is your king. Amen.