

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Hail, King Jesus!

1. Jesus never looked less regal
2. Jesus never was more regal

Matthew 27:27-31

NIV Matthew 27:27 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.

Fellow Subjects of Christ the King,

The origin of the military salute is not clear. It's been suggested that the hand salute is simply an abbreviated version of removing one's helmet as a show of respect. Others think it evolved from the time when knights lifted the visors of their helmets to reveal their identity at the approach of a superior. The most fanciful speculation is that knights raised their hands in this manner to shield their eyes from the dazzling splendor of some highborn person sitting in the stands at a tournament.

Jesus was the object of a salute of sorts before he was taken out to be crucified. But this salute was no show of respect, and still less an effort to shield eyes from the splendor of Jesus. The King of the Jews surrounded by the soldiers here is bruised and bloody. He had already been flogged. If you raised your hand to shield your eyes at the sight of him, it's not because of the splendor of Jesus but because it took a strong stomach or a cold heart to look at him. Yet this is our King. In the few words that Jesus spoke when Pontius Pilate questioned him, he steadfastly testified to his identity as King. And we believe him. But is this part of the Passion history a strange choice for the subjects of the King to reflect on? Is it perhaps more of a lowlight than a highlight? Not at all! Here, in the torment of the Praetorium, the cruel prelude to Calvary, the true glory of our King begins to shine most clearly. It moves us to salute our Savior: **Hail, King Jesus!** We start by acknowledging the obvious, that Jesus never looked less regal, but we go on to see that in truth Jesus was never more regal.

1. Jesus never looked less regal

It says here, "*Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him.*" The sentence had been passed. Pilate had handed Jesus over for execution. But first, Pilate turned his head and allowed his soldiers some time with Jesus. They took him into the Praetorium, the place where Pilate was staying. This may have been the palace of King Herod. If that's accurate, then we have a

King in a palace with robe, scepter, and crown, receiving a royal salute. But there's far more to it than that.

The references to the kingship of Jesus are plentiful in the Gospels. Here in Matthew, we see Jesus as King already at the visit of the Magi. And as Jesus offers his testimony before the Sanhedrin, he is still speaking of his kingship. But Jesus never seemed to look regal. Certainly there were the miracles, stunning testimonials to his kingly character—stilling the storm, feeding the crowds, raising the dead. And there was that glorious night on the Mount of Transfiguration and the blinding sight of his majesty as God. But the trappings of royalty were absent. There was no army, no palace, no robes trimmed with ermine. *“No garb of pomp or pow’r he wore; a servant’s form like mine he bore,”* one of Luther’s hymns says. (CW 377, 6)

But here, as Pilate allows his troops to have at it, Jesus’ identity as King is set in even greater contrast to his appearance. This was brutality bred in the barracks, the spiteful actions of cruel men in a cruel age. “He claims to be a king? Then let’s treat him like the phony king he appears to be!” And quickly sarcasm and anti-Semitism and brutality produce a crown of thorns and a cast-off scarlet cloak and a staff for a scepter. The abuse heaped on Jesus is verbal and physical and psychological. As we see our Savior decked in his own blood and other men’s spit, the seemingly helpless victim of cruel and unusual punishment, the words of Isaiah come to mind: **“Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”** (Is. 53:3)

It isn’t hard to imagine that those who were still loyal to Jesus at that point were not only grieved by what was happening to him, but were disappointed that it had come to this. To borrow a line from the Emmaus disciples, **“We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”** (Luke 24:21) This wasn’t at all what they had in mind. This looked like failure, a violent end to tender hopes. “Cross” doesn’t belong in the same sentence with “King.” It appeared to be a brutal lesson: “This Jesus is not the King you’ve been waiting for.”

We know better, of course. We know how this turns out. We have the advantage of the New Testament and the Holy Spirit’s work. We know that Jesus will triumph. And yet I think we also have our bouts of disappointment with Jesus. We scan our areas of service for visible signs of success and see too often instead what appear to be the unmistakable signs of failure. It often appears to us that we aren’t winning the battle with sin and unbelief and Satan. We cherish the hope that our efforts for Christ will be rewarded with recognizable gains. And sometimes they are. Then the challenge is to give the credit for that success to Christ. But—so often—the tangible proof of success is not there. Instead of fruits of the gospel we see apathy, indifference, sin and reversals instead of progress in holiness. After it happens often enough, disappointment with our Savior can settle in. “Why doesn’t he do more? Why doesn’t he accomplish more in me and through me?” And, not hearing an answer, we’re left as deflated as a punctured beach ball. The problem is that, like the disciples, we bought into a theology of glory. We didn’t reckon with the cross and the opposition it brings. We thought that the truth would manifest its presence with a nearly unbroken string of successes. But Jesus said very clearly that he

was headed for a cross. And he said just as clearly that following him would mean a cross. After he rose from the dead, Jesus said to his disciples, **“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”** (Luke 24:25-26) And he could just as easily say to us, “How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe! Didn’t I tell you that first comes suffering, and then the glory?”

Sometimes, though, what we think we see is not what’s really taking place. We aren’t correctly interpreting what we’re seeing. That’s the case with anyone who thinks that Jesus suffering abuse at the Praetorium is proof of his failure as King. Though to human eyes he never looked less regal, in reality he was never more kingly than he was on the day that he suffered and died for us.

2. Jesus was never more regal

To know whether Jesus was truly a king, you have to know what a king is supposed to do. The job description for our King was published in Ezekiel 34, where the LORD of hosts says, **“I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.”** The earlier verses of that chapter are an indictment especially of the kings, who were to be the shepherds of Israel. They had not cared for God’s flock properly. They had lavished care on themselves, but not on God’s people. Therefore the LORD promises to send one shepherd to tend them. This was a promise of the coming of Christ.

The way to evaluate this King is not on whether he’s managed to garner all the trappings of royalty or how many divisions of troops he has at his disposal, but on whether he looks after God’s sheep. That’s precisely what Jesus was doing there at the Praetorium. He was caring for us. Make no mistake: It was all for us. That’s why he came. That’s why he stayed. That’s why he drained this bitter cup of suffering, though it pained his human soul to think of it. His conduct there was the model of self-control under the severest provocation. **“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth,”** Isaiah says. No retaliation. No threats. No sin at all. **“He bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that by his wounds (we) have been healed.”** (1 Pet. 2:24)

Viewed in this light, we see in Jesus’ Passion not as a display of weakness, but tremendous strength. In that deep humiliation we see the true glory of Christ. The clear light of Easter morning would show that what happened before Pilate and then at Golgotha was not a bitter defeat, but a glorious victory. Jesus did just what our King had to do if he was going to rescue us. He was bruised and broken, torn and tormented so that we can, through faith in his merits, go free.

The soldiers who tormented Jesus there at Pilate’s residence were steeped in ignorance. What they saw was a pitiful-looking Jewish man who claimed to be a king. No one there believed that to be the case. Pilate didn’t believe it. The crowd didn’t believe it. The soldiers certainly didn’t believe it. That’s why they made such a point of mocking Jesus’ claim to be a king. Their ignorant unbelief explains the crown of thorns and the scarlet robe and the stick they gave him for a scepter. They spat on Jesus and beat him because they didn’t believe his claim. But you and I do believe him. And having seen the brutal

torment he silently endured for us only increases our love for him. It moves us to want to give him the honor he deserves, crowning him with many crowns—as the Lord of love and the Lord of life. His kingly love so movingly displayed at the Praetorium moves us to confess him with our lips in the creeds we recite and the witness we give. More than that, recognizing him as our true king we offer him our lives, pledging to respond to his love with our love.

If you wanted a snapshot from the life of Jesus that demonstrated his kingly glory, you could certainly get it at the Mount of Transfiguration. You could find it, too, on the Sea of Galilee, as Jesus stood in the storm-tossed boat and commanded the wind to be calm. But you'll find evidence of Jesus' kingship just as powerfully as he endures a brutal beating from Pilate's soldiers. Beneath that ragged robe and that painful crown beat a heart that loved us without measure, willing to go even to death on the cross to fight our battle for us. For that we say, "Hail, King Jesus!" Amen.