

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California**  
**The Last Sunday of End Time + Christ the King**  
**November 21, 2004**

*Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel*

**Gospel of the Day: Luke 23:35-43**

***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."***

NIV

Have you noticed how people can look at the same thing and yet see it completely differently?

Last week President Clinton opened his presidential library in Arkansas. I've heard that he has a section there describing his impeachment by Congress a few years ago. I haven't seen the display, but I would imagine that he would view that event differently than, say, Henry Hyde, the congressman who wrote the articles of impeachment against him.

We know this is true also with our current president. Some people thought the world as we know it would end if President Bush were reelected. Others thought the world would end if he were not reelected. Same man viewed two different ways.

One Friday in what we now call the First Century A.D., a king made an appearance outside the city wall of Jerusalem. People stood around him watching. Yet even though they were looking at the same person, their views of him differed dramatically.

So did their comments to him. They spoke their minds, and Jesus heard them. Let's listen to what they said.

And more than that—let's think about what our comments to this same king would be. Which do we sound like—which of these people who made comments to the king?

**Your Comment to the King—What Will It Be?**

**"Ridiculous"?**

The king who made an appearance one Friday in the First Century—you've put this together already—is Jesus. I wonder sometimes what Jesus used to think when, growing up in the synagogue, he sang the words of Psalm 22. Does that psalm number ring a bell? It's one we read almost every year on Good Friday. Listen to some excerpts: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? ...I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.'" I wonder how Jesus felt singing those words because he came to know that the words were about him. He was the one who, like no one else before or since, would feel forsakenness. He would feel God the Father turning his back in anger. And he would feel the sting of people hurling insults at him, taunting him even as he died.

That Friday he experienced everything the psalm predicted. 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." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the King of the Jews.

From head to toe he was mocked. Above his head was the sarcastic sign written by Pontius Pilate: "You want to be a king, Nazarene? Then be one. But you must be king while hanging on a cross." And from below his feet you can almost hear the sneering voices of the religious leaders: "If this guy is God's Anointed One, God's Chosen King, well, let him save himself! He helped others; let him now help himself!" And the soldiers, literally adding insult to injury: "'King of the Jews.' A laughable king. If you're a king, rise up and fight! Battle us, destroy us!"

Why did they hate him so? Why the mocking? Why the sarcasm? Why did these people find Jesus to be literally ridiculous?

They aren't here for us to ask them. So I guess we'll have to ask ourselves. Why might we—why *do we*—find Jesus and his claim to be the Christ, the ultimate king, ridiculous?

Maybe it's because Jesus seems to be weak. Hanging there on a cross, bloodied and beaten—how could this man be a king? And still, this man represented by a cross—how could he be the king?

Let me rephrase some of the questions they asked and the comments they made. "This king can't do much, it seems to me. Can't keep bombs from exploding in Iraq, can't keep people from suffering here. If Jesus is the Christ, God's chosen king, then let him do something for me! If he is the king, let him help me; he helped others, after all. If he is the king, let him take away my pain. If you are the king, Jesus, do something to save me."

You object. "I've never spoken in such an insulting way to Jesus." Point taken. I can't remember ever speaking in exactly such terms to him either. But we're still not off the hook. We're not off the hook because we have considered Jesus weak and doubted his kingship. Sometimes it might have been obvious: "I don't really care what Jesus wants. This is what I want and I'm going to do it. And I will get away with it. What's God going to do, strike me with a bolt of lightning?" Other times it might have been subtler: "Should I pray today? I don't know. Why bother? It's not as if Jesus is going to actually do something to respond to my prayer. Go to church? I don't know. Does that really do anything for you?" And we should note that we don't even need to say anything to Jesus

to make a comment to him. Our lives are comments. Our hesitancy in following him, our doubting, our fearfulness—all these are versions of the same tune: “If Jesus is king, let him show it. I doubt he is. He’s too weak. Sometimes ridiculously weak.”

This last presidential campaign made me think of a story I heard several years ago on a Seminary trip to Manassas, Virginia. This is just outside Washington, a bedroom community for the D.C. area. I was there at our sister WELS church in Manassas talking to the pastor. He said that a lot of people in his church worked in government-related jobs. One he mentioned worked as a photographer for the Reuters news agency. He had traveled on Air Force One and covered some high profile stories. Well, in 1996 this man had been assigned to follow the presidential campaign of Senator Bob Dole. You remember Bob Dole, disabled World War II veteran and long-time senator. On one stop during that campaign, Senator Dole was up on a stage about to speak at a rally when he lost his balance—do you remember this?—and fell several feet down off that stage. Guess who was the first one to snap a picture? It was this man from the Lutheran church in Manassas!

Now Senator Dole lost the election to President Clinton, and I doubt it was solely because he fell off the stage that day. But happenings like that give campaign managers fits. You need a presidential candidate to look strong, especially one advanced in years like Bob Dole, running against a younger opponent. You need for your candidate to project strength, not weakness.

But weakness is what Jesus seems to project from the cross of Calvary. It makes the people watching him sneer and mock. Hasn’t it made us—in some form or another—do the same thing?

## Or “Remember me”?

As we read on, the litany of insults continues. “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” It's one of the criminals talking—one of the two being executed alongside Jesus. He looks over and sees the same ridiculous scene: a man who claimed to be a king now being crucified. “Do something! You're the Christ, aren't you?”

But then, surprisingly, a new note sounds out: “Don't you fear God,” he said, “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.” Interesting: “This man has done nothing wrong.” Including claiming to be a king? You mean to say, Criminal #2, that Jesus is right to say he's a king?

That is what he means, for he says next, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Did you catch that? “Your kingdom.” This man *does* believe that Jesus is a king.

We don't know how he learned it. We assume this criminal heard who Jesus was, heard about him in some way. But he knew that though he appeared weak, he was a king nonetheless.

He was right. Think of it this way. What is a king's job? It's to protect his people, to fight off their enemies, to bring them peace. On his cross, ridiculously weak to our eyes, Jesus is protecting us. He is saving us from having to suffer hell for our sins. He is saving us from hell by stepping into our place and suffering it for us. He is bringing us peace with God by letting God pour on him out all the punishment we've piled up for our sins. Jesus, the king, is saving us by dying for us.

He looks weak, but Jesus is actually showing strength beyond what those religious leaders and soldiers could imagine. Jesus is taking on the enemy that no king can defeat: death. He is staring down the sinfulness that condemns the whole world and facing it without flinching. And by this death that he dies, forsaken by the Father, the guilt of the world on his shoulders, he is winning a victory on a scale that the mightiest king couldn't even dream of. He is destroying the power of sin and death and bringing the world peace with almighty God.

And so the criminal says, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” I suppose people nowadays say, “Remember me,” to those running for high office. Something like, “Here's a big contribution to your campaign; now remember me when you get into office.” It's all about trading favors. But I hardly think that's what this criminal was saying to Jesus. After all, what did he have to offer Jesus? Nothing. His request, “Remember me,” was simply a plea for mercy. “Jesus, you are a king. Use your power to help me.”

Notice how the criminal said, “Remember me *when you come into your kingdom.*” As if at some indefinite time in the future Jesus would reign as king. But notice how Jesus answers: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” It's as if Jesus is telling him, “You don't have to wait. I'm ruling right now. I'm in the process of defeating death—including your sin and your death. Because I'm paying for your sins, because I'm giving you peace with God through the shedding of my innocent blood, today you will be with me in paradise. You are pardoned. You have the word of the king.”

Of all the comments we could make to Jesus, the king, I can't think of many better than the one made by this criminal on a cross. “Jesus, remember me when you come

into your kingdom.” It’s a simple plea for mercy. And it’s based on a conviction that, despite appearances, Jesus is living and reigning. “Jesus, forgive me for not acclaiming you as king—for my failures in words and actions and attitudes to acknowledge who you are. Have mercy on me. Use your power to help me.”

And whenever we make that comment to our King, he will answer. “I tell you the truth, today I am reigning. Today my blood pardons you for every sin. Today you are free from their guilt and controlling power. Today my victory over death and hell is your victory. And today, if I call you out of this life, you will be with me in paradise.”

Amen.