

November 20, 2022  
Luke 23:33-43

Christ the King  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“A Kingdom for All”**

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Sanssouci Palace was the summer home of Prussian King Frederick the Great. Located in Potsdam, Germany, near Berlin, Sanssouci (named after the French phrase *sans souci*, meaning “without worries, carefree”) is often counted among the German rivals of Versailles. While it is far smaller than its French counterpart, Sanssouci was built to meet Frederick’s need for a private residence where he could escape the pomp and ceremony of the royal court. The influence of King Frederick’s personal taste in the design and decoration of the palace was so great that its style is characterized as “Frederician Rococo,” and his feelings for the palace were so strong that he conceived it as “a place that would die with him.” While it was used by his heirs after his death, the palace ceased to be a royal residence after the fall of the Hohenzollern dynasty in 1918 and after World War II became a tourist attraction in East Germany. When I visited Sanssouci in 1972 with my school class, we were allowed entrance into the palace and were able to tour through all its rooms, an activity that would have been unthinkable when it was a royal residence. The Prussian King built the palace for his own exclusive use, and the “common people” were not to be allowed inside under any circumstances.

Unlike modern-day monarchies where kings, queens, and princes mingle among their subjects, royalty throughout history lived lives that were separate from their subjects. They spent their days behind palace walls or within fortified castles, making appearances only during grand processions or official state activities; the lives of royals were meant to be separate from the common people.

One of the reasons Jesus often scandalized people in his time was that he was a different kind of king who did not live in a palace but among his people. He eschewed the trappings of royalty, choosing to live an itinerant life with no fixed address. He was often seen in the company of not only common people but the outcasts of society; one of the reasons the Pharisees were scandalized when they saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners was because this was not what a king, the “anointed one” (*messiah*), was meant to be doing. A king belonged in a palace, apart from the people; Jesus chose to be a king who spent his life with people from all walks of life.

Kings were also not meant to suffer such an ignoble form of death as crucifixion. Roman crucifixion was only perpetrated on people of the lower classes and those who were not Roman citizens – certainly not members of nobility. The practice of crucifixion began in the Persian Empire, where the bodies of criminals were put on public display as a deterrent to crime. The Romans adopted this form of capital punishment and made it a widely used form of execution for common criminals because it not only warned the public about crimes against Rome but also added shame, pain, and slow death to the executed. While the Romans would have found ways to execute prominent citizens, they reserved crucifixion only for those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. This may explain why the Romans soldiers who were mocking Jesus were so perplexed that someone known by others as “the King of the Jews” was hanging on a cross and being crucified.

- “If Jesus was true royalty, he would not have been crucified on a cross. Secondly, even if Jesus somehow ended up on a cross, as a person with authority in those days, he would have had the power and influence to secure his own deliverance. So, they likely mocked Jesus because it was obvious to them that Jesus could not have been the person some claimed him to be.” – Debra J. Mumford.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are transported to “*the place that is called The Skull*” (Luke 23:33) and hear the account of the crucifixion of Jesus. It is the horrifying conclusion of a week that began with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, where “*the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’*” (19:37-38). This Holy Week continued with Jesus sharing the Passover Seder with his disciples on Maundy Thursday, when he instituted the Lord’s Supper and instructed his disciples to “*take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.*” (22:17-18). After supper, Jesus retreats to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prays “*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.*” (22:42). Soon he is betrayed by Judas, arrested and brought first before the Sanhedrin and then Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who asks Jesus “*are you the king of the Jews?*” (23:3). While Jesus does not give Pilate a direct answer, Pilate at first refuses to condemn Jesus to death; but after the crowds keep demanding Jesus’ death, Pilate capitulates and handed Jesus over to be crucified. Jesus is led away to be crucified among two common criminals, “*one on his right and one on his left*” (23:33).

Jesus' death on the Cross fulfills his prediction that "*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" (9:22). Many aspects of Luke's account of the crucifixion recall teachings first written in the Old Testament:

- "All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads" – Psalm 22:7.
- "... they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots." – Psalm 22:18.
- "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." – Isaiah 42:1.
- "They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." – Psalm 69:21.

Taken together, these allusions suggest reflections on the ways in which the death of Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures of Israel, that he is indeed "*the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" (Matthew 16:16).

Jesus' first activity upon being nailed to the Cross indicates the kind of King he is and the nature of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed throughout his ministry; he prays "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (23:34). Jesus' pray echoes the petition for forgiveness in the model prayer he teaches the disciples: "*And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us*" (11:4). It also embodies his teaching that "*if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive.*" (17:4).

- "Since Jesus knew well and understood the systems and structures at play, his prayer for forgiveness was for everyone who in any way participated in his crucifixion. He asked God to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. They did not know that he was the Son of God. They did not know that his death would fulfill a greater purpose." – Mumford.

The division of Jesus' garments provides a counterpoint to his prayer for forgiveness. The soldiers go about their grim business unaware of what was transpiring; to them, Jesus is merely another common criminal being crucified, not the fulfillment of Scripture and the one by whose death humanity would be redeemed.

As if to compound his suffering, Jesus is subjected to taunting and mockery while he is dying. The threefold scene of mockery is carried out by the leaders, the soldiers, and even one of the criminals who is being crucified alongside Jesus. In each instance, they mock Jesus as “Saviour,” not realizing that they are actually speaking what will become a central part of the confession of faith of the Christian Church. Through the irony of these taunts, Luke underscores both Jesus’ real identity and the true meaning of his death. Luke reports that *“the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is indeed the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’”* (23:35). Jesus does indeed have the ability to save himself from his death, but Jesus *“did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:6-8). For Jesus to have saved himself would have been a denial of his salvific role in the purposes of God.

- “Jesus’ death did not contradict the Christological claims; it confirmed them ... the irony and pathos of Jesus’ death are that those who mock him declare his messianic identity and the salvific significance of his death but do not grasp the truth they speak.” – Alan Culpepper.

The offering of sour wine might have been meant by the soldiers to be a form of mockery, a burlesque of offering the king the best wine, but unknown to Jesus’ taunters it once again fulfills the Scripture (Psalm 69:21). *“Both what is said and what is done at the Cross, therefore, confirm the truth of Luke’s claims about the one who is crucified: He is the Christ, the King of the Jews, the Saviour.”* (Culpepper). The third taunt comes neither from the leaders nor the soldiers who are overseeing the crucifixion; it is from one of the criminals who is dying alongside of Jesus. Luke reports that *“one of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’”* (23:39). The word translated “derided” is *blasphemeo*, the root word for blasphemy, *“the act or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things.”* The thief’s words are not genuine but are filled with mocking sarcasm, taunting Jesus in the same manner as the others. To him, the thought of the Messiah, the anointed one of God who was supposed to be the liberator of God’s people, is dying next to him on the Cross is absurd; Jesus is no more a Messiah or King that he is. But the attitude of the other criminal dying next to Jesus is different:

- “But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’” – 23:40-41.

Both criminals ask for salvation; but while the first does so with mocking sarcasm, the second asks in an understated echo of Semitic values from the past. The penitent thief’s words fulfill Jesus’ instruction to his disciples, that “*if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.*” (17:3). The criminals are getting what they deserve, but Jesus has done nothing wrong. They have been judged “rightly,” but Jesus is “righteous.”

After rebuking the other condemned man, the penitent thief turns to Jesus and requests that “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” (23:42). The criminal’s request that Jesus “remember me” echoes the plaintive cries of those in need and dying in centuries past:

- “But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place.” – Genesis 40:14.
- “O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death.” – 1 Samuel 1:11.
- “Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.” – Nehemiah 5:19.

Jesus’ reply to the penitent thief’s request is a word of assurance: “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” (23:43). Like the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame in Jesus’ parable of the great banquet (“*Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame*” – 14:21), Jesus assures the criminal that he would feast that day with Jesus in “Paradise” (*paradeisos*), the place designated for the blessed (“*To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.*” – Revelation 2:7). Jesus’ last words to another human being are an assurance of salvation; like Lazarus, he would experience the blessing of God’s mercy (“*the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham*” – 16:22). Jesus began his ministry proclaiming, “*good news to the poor [and] release to the captives*” (4:18), and he ends it by extending an assurance of blessing to one of the wretched who are dying the death of a condemned person alongside of Jesus.

- “Three times he has been mocked with ‘Save yourself,’ the one criminal adding ‘and us.’ Here Jesus does save someone, and that the one saved is a dying criminal is totally congenial to the types of persons blessed by Jesus throughout his ministry: ‘For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’ (19:10).” – Fred Craddock.

Jesus’ words of assurance to the criminal dying at his side are also words of assurance for all for whom our Lord suffered and died. They are the assurance that the kingdom of God is a place in which all are welcome, because Jesus is not a king who chooses to live in a palace removed from people but dwells in the midst of humanity so that all might know that there is a place for them in the presence of the Lord. The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom for all; Jesus is a different kind of king who inaugurates a different kind of kingdom, a kingdom based not on exclusivity but inclusivity, a kingdom where there are no distinctions or means of separation, for in this kingdom “*all are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28). It is a kingdom in which God dwells amid God’s people, where “*the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*” (Revelation 21:3-4a). Our Lord is not a King who reigns from a distance, separate from his people; as the birth of our Saviour was celebrated as the coming of *Immanuel*, we rejoice that “God is with us,” and that because for our sake Christ died and rose again nothing “*can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:39). The Kingdom of God that our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ proclaimed, “*was a world where those on the bottom of society in His day would find liberation from the systems and structures that bind them.*” (Mumford). Palaces like Sanssouci were built to keep kings separate from their subjects, but there are no palaces in the Kingdom of God; the kingdom into which Jesus incorporates all for whom he died is a Kingdom for all!

Amen.