

Matthew 27:11-66

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

April 2, 2023

The King of the Jews

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 27:37: “And over His head they put the charge against Him, which read, „This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. That’s the charge against Him, the one that sticks. That’s what gets Jesus put to death. That’s why it’s on the sign on the cross above His head. It’s the declaration that makes it seem like justice is being done on Golgotha.

Except that everybody knows it’s a lie.

The chief priests know it’s a lie, but they’ve had a tough time coming up with a good reason to kill Jesus. At their own trial before bringing Jesus to Pilate, their false witnesses have only contradicted each other and made the Lord look innocent. When they accuse Jesus of blasphemy before Pilate, Pilate doesn’t care: as the Roman judge of criminal cases, he’s not going to involve himself in some religious squabble. But this accusation of kingship is different. If you claim to be a king, it means that you’re setting yourself up against Caesar as a rival. That’s serious treason in the Roman Empire, a crime punishable by crucifixion. So that’s the one that the chief priests ultimately hang their hat on, and perhaps they can actually make it work out in their minds. After all, they’re terrified that the multitudes are going to follow Jesus and make Him king—they’ve tried it before, after all (John 6:15). If they actually succeed, Caesar will come down on them with an iron fist. If they rationalize this way, though, the Pharisees must conveniently forget that when the crowds tried to make Jesus king, He refused and left them. They must also explain why the innocent Man must die for the sinful desires of the mob that tried to crown Him. (That will never occur to them, because it would bring them far too close to the Gospel.)

They’re not going to take the time to fill in the blanks, though. They simply want Jesus dead and gone, and “the King of the Jews” accusation is the way to get it done. The fact of the matter is that they despise Him for His teaching. If He is right, then they are wrong and they’ve been teaching the nation the wrong stuff for years. For the Pharisees, either He dies or they have to repent; and they’d much rather kill Him than admit their sin. It’s either Him or them. The rival King must die so that they can remain the religious rulers and maintain their manmade theological throne.

Pilate knows it’s a lie. He interrogates Jesus and knows that He’s no threat to Caesar. If the interrogation isn’t enough, Pilate’s wife sends word that Jesus is righteous. Jesus admits to Pilate that He’s a king, but not of this world; therefore, He’s not looking to seize Caesar’s territory. Instead, says Jesus, He’s come to speak the truth. A king of truth is no threat to Caesar: a rabbi who refuses an earthly crown isn’t trouble, and brute force does a fine job of silencing speakers if needed. Pilate demonstrates this before the day is out, but not because he wants to. In a fantastic miscarriage of justice, he declares Jesus to be innocent no less than three times—innocent! Innocent men are free to

go. But having declared Jesus innocent, Pilate sentences Him to scourging and death. Amazing: let the court record show that Jesus is condemned to death for being not guilty!

Why? Because Pilate's a disaster as a ruler and already on thin ice with Caesar back in Rome. If word gets back to Rome that he's pardoned a man who claims to be king, Pilate faces a dismal future of either quick death or maybe a job fighting the blue people in Britain. That will be the final confirmation to all that Pilate's a complete failure. It's either Jesus or Pilate, truth and justice or expediency and self-preservation. Pilate certainly doesn't feel good about it, but he'd rather sacrifice the King of the Jews and save some face, if not his life. For a while.

The soldiers know it's a lie. They know this King of the Jews is no danger to Caesar and they show it by their actions. They strip Him down and mockingly clothe Him in the scarlet robe of a ruler. They crown Him with a crown of thorns to show how worthless is His kingdom. They put a reed in His hand for a scepter to show how poor a King He is. Then they kneel and worship Him, crying out "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then they take the King's scepter and they beat His head with it. There is no respect and there is no fear—there is never a more flagrant example of people who honor Jesus with their lips while their hearts are far from Him. For the soldiers, it's either Jesus or them: one of them has authority and one of them does not. To truly worship Jesus would be to submit to Him and His authority, to admit that this isn't a world where you assert yourself and grab what you can get. They opt for the will of man by scourging and killing the King of the Jews.

And you? You know the truth, don't you? This is the sinless Son of God, begotten of His Father from eternity and born of the virgin Mary for you. He has come to deliver you from sin and death and hell. He has come to be your King. But you will find that, daily, you will want the Bible to say things it doesn't and want it to not say things that it does. You'll want the Word of God to conform to your ideas, and the result is little different from the Pharisees. Confronted with temptation, it's either you or Jesus, your desire or His perfect will. You'll argue a long time how your sins are necessary and justified and helpful—why, in this case or that case, it's best that the King bow to you.

Daily, you'll want to hold onto pride, and you'll fear the consequences of admitting fault. Rather than acknowledge your sin, you'd much rather deny His innocence and holiness. It's either Him or you. Like Pilate, confronted with the need to repent, you won't want to admit He is right, for to do so would be to confess you are wrong.

Daily in this dog-eat-dog world, you'll naturally follow the notion that this is a world of taking and self-service; and you'll act as if the Lord is weak and unable to help, so you'd better look after yourself at the expense of truth and your neighbor. In your own subtle ways, like the soldiers you'll assert yourself and grab what you can rather than submit to the One who commands you to love God and neighbor.

Daily, you'll crown yourself king. Daily, you'll turn to yourself as your god.

That's why this cast of characters all want Jesus put to death. Even when the outcome is certain, the scorn doesn't stop. As Christ hangs dying, the chief priests cry out, "He saved others; He cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him" (Matthew 27:42). That's their "proof" that Jesus is a nothing. They can't stop proving to themselves

and others that they're right, that He's wrong. Sinners just don't stop protesting to prove that they have power. That He's weak and insignificant and gone. That's how man treats this King of the Jews.

"He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him." It's true that He has saved others: His miracles abound. But it's wrong to say "He cannot save Himself;" rather, He will not save Himself. This King would rather sacrifice Himself and die to save others. It's either Him or you who dies for your sin, and Jesus wills that it be Him. So when He's accused at His trial of all sorts of sins, He remains silent no matter how outrageous the slander: because while He's not guilty of them, you are, and somebody must pay. It's either Him or you, so Jesus accepts the accusations so He can die for the sins. And though He could come down from the cross, He does not: if He doesn't die for the sins of all people, then it will be impossible for anyone to believe in Him. It is the way of those Pharisees, rulers and soldiers to avoid sacrifice and make others hurt to retain power. It is the way of you, and that deserves God's wrath: so Christ suffers the wrath and hell in your place. It's either Him or you. Thus is crucified the King of the Jews. Man wants Him gone, but He dies willingly to save man. But Good Friday is not the end, when they might well shout, "The King is dead;" for on Easter Sunday, His people will declare, "Long live the King!" For Christ is risen from the dead, that you might be His people delivered from sin and death and hell. He lives and reigns long—forever!—so that He might tell you that you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.