

This is the king

Luke 23:33-43

November 20, 2016

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

What did he want? He wanted to be remembered. He didn't want to be forgotten. He had made a mess of his life and he knew it, but he didn't want to be forgotten, disappear from this earth as if he never existed, remembered by nobody, mattering to nobody.

He wanted what I want. He wanted what I believe all of us want more than anything else: to be noticed, to be thought of, to be remembered, to matter to somebody, to be loved by somebody.

Whom did he want to be remembered by? He wanted to be remembered by Jesus. Jesus was there hanging like him on a Roman cross, but somehow, some day, he believed Jesus would be somewhere and could remember him, if he would.

Whom did he believe Jesus to be? A king. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom," he said. He asked to be remembered by a man he believed to be a true king.

The other criminal asked to be saved, only he didn't really mean it. He didn't really believe Jesus was a king, a messiah. He didn't really believe Jesus could save anybody. He only said it to mock Jesus, to get some sick pleasure in his last moments by tormenting this man on whom so many gullible people had pinned their hopes, but who was clearly no better man than he. One said: "If you are a king, save me." The other said: "You are a king. Remember me."

When? When did he want to be remembered? When Jesus becomes king. "When you come into your kingdom." When Jesus begins to rule.

Today you will be with me in Paradise.

When did Jesus remember him? "Today!" That very day! So when did Jesus come into his kingdom? "Today!" That very day! The condemned man got his wish much sooner than he expected. That very day Jesus began to rule.

This is the king! That's what it said, the inscription pinned to the cross over Jesus' head: "This is the king of the Jews." Who wrote those words? The Roman executioners. Then did the Romans believe Jesus to be a king? Hardly.

The Jewish leaders brought the accusation that Jesus "claimed" to be a king, hoping to convince the Roman authorities that Jesus was a dangerous rebel and needed to be dealt with accordingly. But the Romans weren't fooled. This man presented no danger to them. He was harmless, not a rebel, and certainly not any kind of a king.

But when they did decide to execute him, for whatever reason, this was what they wrote: "This is the king of the Jews." It was a joke, told not to mock Jesus, but to mock the Jews. This is your king! Ha, ha ... You are waiting for a messiah, a king, to deliver you? Well, here he is! Ha, ha ... It is the kind of cruel joke people on top tell people on the bottom to remind them they will ever and always be what they are now -- on the bottom!

But the irony is, what they wrote was true. He is the king of the Jews. And he is the king of the Romans. He is King of kings and Lord of lords! This is the king. And when did he come into his kingdom?

This is the king, hanging on a cross, suffering with people who suffer, suffering for people who suffer, taking on himself the worst this world has to dish out, shaming it by his shame, overpowering it by his powerlessness, shattering its pride by his humility, thwarting its disobedience by his obedience. Here and only here, he won. God won. We won.

This is the king, a king like no other, not saving himself, but saving others, saving every other. Saving, sacrificing, giving, dying -- this is how he is king. This is what a king is.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Today you will be with me in Paradise.

In Paradise! And where is Paradise? Somewhere "out of this world," a place to which the departed souls of this man and Jesus would be transported after death? Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world?"

No, to believe that Paradise is somewhere "out of this world" is despair. To believe that is to have given up on this world, to believe that this world is irredeemable, that we have destroyed it beyond even God's capacity to repair. No, "not of this world" means not of "this world," not of this world as it is, as it does, not of this world's ways, not a kingdom like the kingdoms of this world, not a king like the kings of this world.

Jesus' kingdom is not of "this world," but Jesus' kingdom is most definitely of this world, of this earth! Paradise is a word that means garden, God's garden, the Garden of Eden, a place of earth, a place on earth, a place of beauty and joy and fruitfulness, a place of communion where God "walks" among his people and lives among his people, a place where we enjoy peaceful fellowship with God and each other.

Jesus said: "Today." Because in that moment, by his faith in Jesus, by his acknowledgment that Jesus is king, he was there, with Jesus, in Paradise, literally in a place where, even hanging from a cross, he had peace with God, he had peace. He was not forgotten, but remembered by God, held then and there and always in God's hands. Then and there, he was not a convict, not a victim of Roman imperialism, not a sinner, but the friend of Jesus, the friend of God. Then and there, at that moment, he entered the kingdom of God.

So what does this mean for us? It means that we live in a world where Jesus is king. Not Caesar, not Pharaoh, not the president of the United States, not the Russian president, and certainly not me, or you! Not capitalism, not socialism, not science, not technology, not money, not power, not liberalism, not conservatism, not the pursuit of happiness, not even the pursuit of meaning, not fortune, not fame, not family. Jesus is king, King of kings and Lord of lords!

And when I know that, when I acknowledge that Jesus is king, when I serve no other master, but follow his way, the way of the cross, the way of humility, the way of obedience, the way of sacrifice, the way of love, then I am already with him, already with him in Paradise, already with him living in this world as it is meant to be, as it will be.