

**LUKE 23:33-43**  
**ST JOHN'S, 24.11.19, 9.30 am**

**INTRODUCTION**

If I were to ask you to imagine a king, what sort of picture would come to your mind? Probably a young, tall, handsome man, dressed in royal robes with lots of jewels, and a crown on his head. He's probably got lots of servants, and everyone bows to him when they come into his presence. Or maybe you picture a knight in shining armour, going into battle. Kings and Queens are rich and powerful; their lives bear very little relation to the lives of ordinary people like you and me.

Today we're thinking about King Jesus, the King of kings, who is enthroned in the heavens, and fills the earth with his glory. But our gospel passage shows us a very different picture. Instead of a king living in luxury, richly dressed, surrounded by servants bowing down to him, we have a completely naked man, nailed to a cross, totally at the mercy of the Roman soldiers, and surrounded by hostile, mocking crowds. On one side of him, a criminal taunts him, "*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" (v 39). But on the other side of him is the one person who recognises Jesus for who he is, and says to him, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*" (v 42).

In many ways, these two responses to the sight of Jesus hanging on a cross sum up the responses of people throughout the world and down the ages, to a crucified king. So let's think a little more about the responses of the two criminals crucified with Jesus.

**ARE YOU NOT THE CHRIST? SAVE YOURSELF AND US!**

I suspect that every single person here this morning can relate to the impenitent criminal. I certainly can: "If you're the King of kings and Lord of lords, why didn't you prevent my parents divorcing each other? . . . why didn't you heal my friend Colette, instead of allowing her to die from cancer? . . . why did you let my sister die? . . . why did my Mum get ill and die, when she was so healthy? . . . why *didn't* you save yourself from the cross? Why *don't* you save us from the crosses we have to bear? What use are you as Messiah, as King, if you can't even prevent yourself being crucified, or save yourself from the cross?" We all have our heart-felt cries, things we long to be different, things which surely the King of the universe could accomplish, if only he put his mind to it.

To our human way of thinking, it's a very strange kind of King who doesn't use his power, his influence, or his connections, to get himself off the cross. We know Jesus could have done just that. But he didn't. Because, *how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled that it must be so?* (Matthew 26:53-54).

There are times when Jesus does use his power, his influence, his connections, to remove the cross of suffering from other people's backs. We hear stories of Jesus miraculously healing people, both in the gospels, and today. But it isn't always like that. Not everyone is healed. Sometimes people suffer for no obviously good reason, and we're left asking, along with the unrepentant criminal, "*Are you not the Christ? Why don't you save us?*"

There are no answers as to why the Lord allows so much suffering in this world. But his nature is not to avoid suffering, because his nature is love. If a child is sick or hurt, and needs to go to hospital, nothing will keep that child's parents away from them, because they love their child. *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to us* (Psalm 103:13). If we're suffering in any way, nothing will keep our Lord away from us, because he loves us. He doesn't ask us to suffer anything which he hasn't been prepared to go through himself – whatever we're suffering, Jesus has been there before us, and is longing to *comfort us in all our affliction* (2 Corinthians 1:4). We don't know why the Lord allows us to suffer, but we do know that he's right there with us, no matter what we're going through, he won't abandon us.

### **JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM!**

Somehow, despite Jesus' appearance that day, the other criminal recognised his kingship. He wasn't the only person there that day who knew that Jesus was suffering innocently. Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene and John were all there. They all knew that Jesus was innocent, but if they'd ever believed him to be Messiah, they gave up that hope as they stood by the cross. Only the second criminal saw the truth: that this man, hanging on a cross, was Messiah, the coming Saviour-King. And if he was Messiah, then there was a God who cared about justice. And if Jesus was Messiah, and God cared about justice, then the things he's heard about resurrection must be true, and Messiah would be raised from the dead and *come into [his] kingdom*

(v 42). And if that was all true, then while he was *receiving the due reward* for his crimes (v 41), there was every possibility of being saved from God's anger and entering his kingdom. And so the criminal's heart was changed, and all he wanted was to become a subject in Jesus' kingdom, if Jesus would have him: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom* (v 42).

Jesus' reply shows us a number of things. Firstly, despite everything, Jesus never doubted his own identity: he knew that he was Messiah, chosen and anointed by God, the Saviour of the World, King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus didn't lose sight of the fact that he had the authority to assure the penitent criminal that he was forgiven.

Jesus' reply also shows us once again just how amazing is God's grace. Anyone who repents and believes is immediately and completely forgiven and accepted by God. There are no half-measures. There's no 'let's wait and see how you shape up as a believer'. The Lord simply welcomes anyone who repents and believes into his kingdom, to be with him.

### **CONCLUSION**

Think for a moment what you might have seen, if you'd been present at the crucifixion. Would you have seen a criminal getting what he deserved? Would you have seen your closest friend dying? Would you have seen your Lord and Master dying? Or would you have seen the King of kings and Lord of lords, enthroned on the cross, high and lifted up, glorified even as he died?

Think again about how you feel about the fact that Jesus didn't save himself and the two criminals from the agony of crucifixion. For myself, I'm thankful that Jesus refused to give in to the taunts of the first criminal, and some of the soldiers and onlookers. Because if Jesus hadn't died on that cross, then the way to Paradise wouldn't be open to you and me. But I still struggle to accept it when I'm suffering, or I see other people suffering, and Jesus does nothing to alleviate that suffering. I need to accept that the King who chooses to come and suffer with us, the King who loves us so much that nothing we can say or do will keep him away from us, the King who is filled with compassion for us, also sometimes chooses not to use his power, his influence or his connections to make it all better. I don't know why, but I do know that he loves each and every one of us dearly, so I have to learn to trust that he does know best.

And think again about how you feel about Jesus' promise to the second criminal: *today you will be with me in Paradise* (v 43). To those of us who are being saved, God's grace is amazing, but to others its offensive. Why should a criminal be forgiven, just like that? Why should the prodigal son be welcomed home and given a party? Why should the workers in the vineyard be paid the same, whether they've worked for one hour or twelve hours? Why should you or I be completely loved, accepted and forgiven by the King of kings and Lord of lords. Why? Because he loves us, because he longs to welcome us into his kingdom, where he can enjoy our company for all eternity.