

“Names of Wondrous Love: King”

Jesus is a king. There is no doubt about it. Almost from the beginning of his life on this earth, he was called a king. Remember the question of the Wise Men when they came from the East looking for him? They asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” (Mt 2:2). Remember Nathanael’s comment when Jesus called him as a disciple? He confessed, **“You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel,”** (Jn 1:49). Remember also the Savior’s triumphal parade into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? That’s what Zechariah had foretold with the words: **“See, your king comes to you, . . . gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,”** (Zec 9:9). A number of times the Gospels call Jesus a king.

On Good Friday the term *king* was heard again and again. The Jews accused Jesus of being a king. Pilate asked Jesus whether he was a king. And Jesus did not deny or sidestep the question. Rather, he gave a clear answer, and in that answer we find his wondrous love for sinners. The words of John 18, beginning with verse 33 help us to focus on this name of wondrous love: King.

³³ **Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”** ³⁴ **“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”** ³⁵ **“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”** ³⁶ **Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”** ³⁷ **“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”**

Later on that Friday, a sign was fastened to Jesus’ cross that read: **“JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”** The Jewish leaders weren’t happy at all with this sign. They said, **“Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews”** (Jn 19:21), but to no avail. It wasn’t that those religious leaders didn’t want a king. They very much wanted the Messiah to be one. They wanted a king who would pat them on the back and tell them how holy they were. They had been waiting for a king who would put help them in their self-righteous plans of building a ladder to heaven by keeping the laws God had given and the ones they had added. And when Jesus didn’t do this, they rejected him. When Jesus called them whitewashed hypocrites and poisonous vipers, he had to go. And consider this example of their hypocrisy: on Good Friday those religious leaders stood outside the judgment hall of the Gentile Pilate, being careful not to defile themselves. Yet, at the same time, they were defiling themselves by demanding the murder of a king who was innocent.

Those leaders also told Pilate **“We have no king but Caesar”** (Jn 19:15). Again, what hypocrisy! They had been waiting for a Messiah who would pry Rome’s heavy boot off their necks. Their idea of a king was one who would marshal opposition against the hated Roman conqueror and lead their nation back to the glory days of King David. But when Jesus came preaching, **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”** (Lk 20:25) and speaking of a heavenly kingdom without geographical borders, they would have none of it. Instead they plugged unbelief’s fingers into their ears and brought this “would-be king” to Pilate for execution.

The common people also had their ideas as to what kind of king Jesus should be. When he had filled their stomachs with miraculous fish and loaves in the wilderness, they thought they had the king they wanted. This Jesus could be their permanent social security, the one who would take care of all their needs and satisfy all their desires. They couldn’t get beyond the earthly miracle to its heavenly meaning. As a result they missed the King who was the true Bread of Life for hungry sinners.

Today it's time for us to ask ourselves this searching question: What kind of king do we want Jesus to be? Of course, we want our sovereign to watch over us on this earth. We want and need the monarch who provides our daily bread and protects our daily breath. We turn to him, asking him to give us our daily bread and all that goes with it. And he does by wisely measuring and graciously supplying our daily needs. Admit it though. Don't we at times want even more from our King? Don't we want him to keep all problems and pains away from us? Forgetting that he knows what's best for us, don't we expect from his hand skies that are always sunny and paths that are always smooth? And when that's not the way life goes, what's our reaction? When cancer strikes, relatives disappoint, earthly goods evaporate, plans fail, dreams vanish, does the question "Is this the King I want?" sneak into our hearts? Even worse, do we begin to question our King's wondrous love for us?

May Jesus graciously forgive us for the times we've questioned his kingship. May he send his Holy Spirit to show us again that Jesus is the King we need. What kind of king is that? Listen again to what Jesus told Pilate: **"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place"** (Jn 18:36). Earthly rulers can map out how far their reign extends and make plans for its extension. Earthly rulers have armies at their disposal to enforce their will upon their subjects and to defend against opposition. Earthly rulers can levy taxes and fill their coffers with the peoples' coins. As a representative of the greatest world power at that time, Pilate was well aware of what the kings and kingdoms of this world were all about. Now Jesus, the King of wondrous love, was trying to tell him about a better kingdom from a far better place.

"You are right in saying I am a king," Jesus continued. **"In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me"** (Jn 18:37). Jesus was speaking not only to Pilate but to you and me. Listen closely to his blessed words. In wondrous love our heavenly King reaches for us, wanting more than anything else to have us as citizens in his kingdom. Urgently Jesus says, "I am your King. I don't want your land and your goods, your taxes and your sweat. I want your heart. I want to rule over your heart with my love. I came to earth to pay for you with my precious blood. I come to make you mine not with royal pomp and power but with the simple truths of salvation. Through the power of my gospel, I want to live in you and I want you to live for me. Finally, I want you with me in heaven. This wonderful truth, this blessed truth that all who believe in me shall not perish but have eternal life, I came to prepare and to offer to all the children of man. And when you have this truth, you have it all."

"Are you a king?" Pilate asked and heard Jesus' amazing answer. Unfortunately, Pilate didn't really listen. Instead of kneeling before the King of wondrous love, he handed him over to the cross. Thank God you and I know better. By God's grace we can sing again this Lenten season, "Crown him the Lord of love—behold his hands and side, rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified. No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bends his wond'ring eye at mysteries so bright" (CW 341:2). Thank God, you and I this Lenten season can raise eyes of faith to that matchless King and can confess in wondering love, "He is my King."

Our King has still more waiting for us. Look where he has promised to take us—to his kingdom above where there will be no more death to slay me or sin to stain me. There he has perfect care waiting for us, his subjects, and perfect peace for our hearts. In that heavenly kingdom, we'll raise with all the saints who have gone before the hymn of praise, **"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever"** (1 Ti 1:17).

May God keep our eyes in faith on that King of love till we praise him together above. Amen.