

“You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

What do you think of when you hear the word “paradise”? Maybe what comes to mind is a tropical vacation that you took or hope to take, with beautiful weather, and plenty of leisure time on the beach. Maybe it’s a mountaintop view that is so stunning that you simply want to stay and stare at its impressiveness. Maybe paradise for you is simply a time when friends and family are together and everyone is getting along and enjoying themselves. And the thing about any of these paradise scenarios, or whatever one you come up with for yourself, is that you just don’t want it to end.

But you know what? It does end. You come home from vacation. You come down from the mountain. Friends and family members don’t always get along, and even tropical vacation spots sometimes experience bad weather. At best, our earthly examples of paradise are short-lived.

The Bible tells us about another paradise that was all too short-lived. That was the Garden of Eden, the perfect home of Adam and Eve. We understand a few aspects of this paradise. It was full of fruit trees. It was beautiful. It had streams running through it. But other aspects we can’t even begin to fathom. The inhabitants of the Garden were perfectly matched and lived in a perfect, loving marriage relationship. And their relationship with God was perfect, too. They walked with him and talked with him and wanted everything that he wanted. But eventually Adam and Eve fell short of God’s expectations. They sinned and plunged all of creation into an imperfect darkness. Our paradises now are barely even worth comparing to what once was.

On the other hand, they are barely worth comparing to what will be again. The Bible compares heaven to the perfect paradise of Eden. There perfect unity will be restored, and all pain and death and sorrow will be left behind. No trace will be found of the evil we now suffer because of sin.

Naturally, the season of End Time, about to come to a close, has invited us to look forward to and to anticipate this perfect paradise. God’s promise to us is the promise of paradise. Jesus says, “You will be with me there.” It is a promise from a king, and a promise for sinners.

The promise was made by Jesus the King. On Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate the fact that he is a King. But he is not like the earthly kings we might recognize. Listen once more to our sermon text, where we hear of this unique king and his precious promise. Here is Luke 23:35-43:

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

This is our king. This is Jesus. He is and always has been a King. He is the almighty God, Creator of the universe. And yet here we find him hanging on a cross. There’s a sign above him that clearly states he is the King of the Jews, but what king needs a sign to identify him? We usually identify kings by their crowns or their thrones, or by the people who bow in humility and awe in front of them. But the people mock and ridicule this king. They call on him to prove himself, to rescue himself. But he doesn’t.

This King isn’t interested in preserving his life or saving himself. He isn’t interested in destroying the people who mock and ridicule him. He’s interested in saving them and sacrificing himself. The long-promised King of the Jews came to suffer and die. He came to destroy his enemies of sin, death, and

hell. He came to suffer not for his own sins, because he had none, but for yours and mine and for those of his mockers. The picture of Jesus on the cross is a picture of the victory and success of our King being accomplished. Just as the apostle described it in our Second Lesson: **“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross”** (Colossians 1:19-20).

Jesus our King died on the cross to forgive sins and to bring sinners to paradise. Only most of the sinners in our sermon text wanted nothing to do with him. Jesus isn't impressive. He isn't leading a throng of excited followers to conquer their enemies. He wasn't what the crowd wanted or what they hoped for. They refused to follow him. They refused to trust him. They refused to honor him.

And aren't there too many times that we do the same? Our King gives us the gift of his Word and invites us to read and study the Bible daily. But far too often it stays on our shelves. He invites us to serve others in love, but we're often too busy caring only about ourselves.

When Christians claim to follow the King, but ignore his commands, aren't they sneering at him in the same way the crowd did? When they live with a boyfriend or girlfriend instead of marrying first, when they divorce their spouse just because they decided that marriage was too much work, when they drink too much, aren't they saying that they really don't want Jesus to be their King? And it doesn't need to be such a big example to go against Christ's commands. What about jealous thoughts? What about pride? What about lust or greed?

And here's the scary thing: Jesus didn't promise paradise to anyone in the crowd. It's not that he didn't die for their sins. It's not that his Word of invitation wasn't meant for them. They simply rejected Jesus and what he came to do for them. And like so many, they chased after their own personal goals and missed out on the greatest treasure. And that is precisely the direction that our sinful natures would gladly take us.

Now look again at the man to whom this promise was first spoken. He was a convicted, condemned criminal hanging on the cross next to Jesus. By his own admission he deserved to die. Everyone else mentioned in the text was busy ridiculing Jesus. Only this man realized and recognized that Jesus was a king. “Remember me,” he begged, “when you come into your kingdom.” All he asked was for Jesus to show him mercy. He knew full well he didn't deserve it, but he also saw that Jesus was no ordinary king. And Jesus' response was far from ordinary. **“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

That very day the joys of heaven would welcome this criminal. That very day he would stand in the presence of the King in his kingdom. It wasn't because of anything that he had done. It wasn't because he was smart enough to realize that Jesus was something special. It was because Jesus died for his sins and because the Holy Spirit worked faith in his heart.

This man's reaction to Jesus reminds us how we ought to approach our King. Jesus died on the cross for you and for me just as certainly as he did for the criminal next to him. He has called us to faith through baptism and his Word. There ought to be no end to our praise and thanks. As amazing as the promise was to this criminal, the same promise is ours: because of what Jesus has done for us, our sins are forgiven, and we will spend eternity with him in paradise.

Once again this Church Year, we have celebrated the life, death and resurrection of our King. We have seen how his love reached out for us to make us his own, and we have considered how he would have us live our lives for him. It is certainly fitting that as we close out the Church Year on this Christ the King Sunday, we do so by hearing that amazing gospel promise: “You will be with me in paradise.” With that good news ringing in our ears, we will gladly acknowledge Jesus as our King and thank and praise him for all he has done for us. And we will wait eagerly for the day that he brings us to be with him in that blessed place.