

### “What Does the True King Look Like?”

I had an interesting conversation with some children recently when they wanted to talk about the meaning of the phrase Black Friday. You probably heard that phrase at some point in the last few days as people generally use it to refer to the day after Thanksgiving Day. It was interesting because one of the children had a guess as to why that day has that name. “Is it because the day is so different from Thanksgiving? Is it black Friday because after a day when people are so thankful and thoughtful, the next day is kind of the opposite?” That explanation does make some sense. A day that is known for shopping and finding the greatest possible deals is in some ways the opposite of a Thanksgiving Day. I tried to explain what it means for a business to be in the red or in the black and how that relates to Black Friday. As the conversation continued, we discussed how Good Friday and Black Friday are terms that aren’t necessarily clear and straightforward. Black Friday is a good thing for businesses, but the name doesn’t always sound like it, and there can definitely be a dark side to that day. Good Friday is certainly a good day, but in a way that isn’t immediately obvious from the events of that day.

Our sermon text for this morning on Christ the King Sunday takes us to some of the dark events of that first Good Friday. It shows us what happened to Jesus at the hands of the Roman soldiers. These events invite us to look at a king that doesn’t look much like a king. This day that really defines all of history for us appears in many ways to be one of the darkest days in the history of the world.

We read the words of Matthew 27 earlier. Those words record the treatment of Jesus after the time he was condemned to death, sentenced to be crucified, but before the crucifixion was carried out. And this treatment was appalling. The soldiers assigned to Pontius Pilate took charge of Jesus. And they mocked him ruthlessly. They apparently had heard of his claims to be the King of the Jews, so they ridiculed this idea that their prisoner was a king. A king would wear a fancy robe, so they found a robe for him. A king would need a royal crown, so they twisted together a crown of thorns and pressed it onto Jesus’ head. A king would be honored with bowing and cheering, so they knelt and shouted, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And just so no one would mistake their actions for genuine honor, the soldiers struck Jesus and spit on him.

Only then were they ready to crucify him, so they lead him out to do exactly that.

Why do you suppose the soldiers treated Jesus this way? We know from secular history that Roman soldiers were skilled executioners. They knew how to carry out a crucifixion and to use it to inflict incredible pain and humiliation. But it seems that Jesus received special attention, maybe beyond what the average criminal would suffer. It’s a bit of speculation to guess that the claims that Jesus had made that he was the king of the Jews had particularly affected these soldiers. They seem offended by it, that they reacted so strongly and chose that aspect of Jesus’ claims to design their mockery. After all, these soldiers were ultimately responsible to the Roman throne. Any claim to kingly status was a threat against the authority which they supported.

And it seems that they took this claim personally. I said it was a bit speculative because the Bible doesn’t describe their motives for us, but doesn’t this explanation fit with what we know about people? Who likes to listen to someone else claim a position of power or authority when they don’t have it or don’t deserve it? That’s the way these soldiers seem to be looking at Jesus. They are jealous for their own recognition and position. They are selfishly concerned about losing what they have if Jesus would rise to prominence. They simply want to exercise their power over him.

Does that sound like anyone you know? I don’t mean to imply that we would do these exact same things, but the issues of jealousy and self-interest, those are common to so many of us. Not only do you likely know someone who struggles with these issues, you likely do, too. How do you feel when you see someone get recognition you don’t think that they deserve? How do you react when someone gets attention that you think could just as easily belong to you? It is so easy for us to read about what the soldiers did and to think that we would never do anything like that, but deep down we know that were the situations reversed...well, the same sin lives in our hearts as theirs.

But it's not in the heart of their victim. Though they clearly do not know it, the one they are abusing is none other than the perfect Son of God. He is there as a completely innocent victim. He is a man without jealousy or anger. He never abused another soul. But he is under their authority and facing their abuse willingly. He is not there because he is a victim of betrayal or because the Jewish leaders were as jealous as these soldiers. He is there because he predicted that he would be mistreated and sentenced to die. He is there because he is doing his work of saving sinners by his own innocent suffering and death. He is there because he loves you and me and because he loves even the soldiers who are heaping abuse on him. He is there because he is the King of the Jews. In fact, he is there because he is the King of the World, even though no one would know it by looking at him.

It's clear, isn't it, when we talk about Christ the King, that he is a different sort of king? We expect kings to be more like the soldiers than like Jesus. Kings have power and prestige. They receive glory from their subjects, who bow down or kneel, or treat them with whatever respectful protocol is proper. Most kings are respected by the people, honored, and obeyed whether the people really want to do that or not. They are treated like this whether the people like it or not. Simply because they're kings. They can enforce that sort of behavior. They command armies. They wield power.

Our King Jesus could have done all that. From eternity he is true God, equal with God the Father in all ways. With his almighty power the world was created. If he would want to enforce a regulation or demand a behavior, he most certainly could. There is no one who is more deserving of respect and honor than Jesus. There is no one more glorious. He commands armies of angels and controls all things by the power of his word. This is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But in order to save you, in order to save me, in order to save the world, he set aside the use of his power and the expectation of glory and honor. This little glimpse of his life is really representative of the whole thing. In humility he was born to a virgin in a stable. Humbly he grew up in a poor household. Modestly he gathered around him a small band of fishermen followers. Meekly he preached and taught, lived a homeless and nomadic life, and unassumingly went about his work.

That humility and meekness turned many away from him. They wanted to follow a king in the earthly mold. They wanted to see glory and to witness power. But for all of his life except for a moment here or there, Jesus' power and glory remained hidden. Our account from Good Friday shows the full extent to which Jesus humbled himself, enduring even this level of disgrace and mockery. And when it was complete, he was marched out to be nailed to a cross. That's your King.

Yes, that is your King. That is how much he loves you, that you were more important to him than exercising power or experiencing glory. That he was willing to face ridicule and rejection and suffering and pain, even death, for you. What does the true King look like? He looks like a suffering servant, suffering so that he might be the Good Shepherd of his people.

And with his work complete, he has once again claimed full use of his power and the glory that he is due. He rose from the dead to proclaim that death had been once and all defeated. We sang before the sermon: "The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now." But we still don't always see that. The time is coming when Jesus will return with angels accompanying him, in his full glory. He will leave no doubt for anyone that he is the King of the world.

And until that time comes, he asks us to trust. He invites us to follow his example of not serving himself but serving others. He invites us to wait patiently through whatever trials and troubles, whatever mockery and mistreatment we might suffer. And he promises that ultimately we will share in his glory.

This is your King. Crown him with many crowns. Serve and honor him. Share him with others. To him be glory forever and ever.

The Text: Matthew 27:27–31 (NIV)

<sup>27</sup> Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. <sup>28</sup> They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup> and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. <sup>30</sup> They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. <sup>31</sup> After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.