

ADVENT SYMBOLS: THE SCEPTER – THE SNEER

Real Jews know why their King's throne is the cross

Real Jews know they will see Him in Paradise.

Luke 23:35-43

TEXT: *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." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

In Jesus' name, my fellow redeemed:

It would seem unusual to celebrate Advent with a sermon based upon an account of Jesus' crucifixion, just as it may have seemed unusual when the Gospel Lesson from last Sunday was the account of Jesus' entrance into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the cheers and acclamation of the Jews. But our Lord's words to Pontius Pilate ring loud and clear as to the purpose for which he was sent into the world. Pilate asked Jesus: *Are you the king of the Jews?* Jesus replied:

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. Jn 18 So today, as we listen to Jesus who testified of himself saying: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* Jn 14 We will consider advent symbol of the Scepter, the symbol of a king, and the Sneer of the unbelieving Jews. Real Jews know why their King's throne is a cross; and, Real Jews know that they will see him in Paradise.

One of the many ironies of our Lord's crucifixion is that against the protests of the Jewish religious leaders, Pontius Pilate had a written notice posted above Jesus: **THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.** What a joke! The king desired by the majority of the Jews and their religious leaders was the one they believed God would send to relieve them of the oppression of the Romans. Despite his miracles, they continued to harden their hearts against the reality of Jesus' divine nature. Even after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Bible says: *Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.... If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. ... So from that day on they plotted to take his life.* Jn 11 What came first for these Jews? It was their own survival.

Hanging on crosses on either side of Jesus were two criminals. The Bible says: *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* It was against Roman law for a Roman citizen to be put to death by crucifixion. That suggests that this man was probably a Jew. In addition, he appears to have some knowledge of the promise of the Messiah's coming for he asks Jesus: *Aren't you the Christ?* And then demands: *Save yourself and us!* Even though he is dying a wretched torturous death, his knowledge of the Christ of God would serve him only as an earthly king. In his mind, at this desperate hour, all he wants is a king who will get him out of the painful pickle he is in.

There was one Jew who knew why Jesus, God's King, was on the cross. Her name was Mary. It was all her fault. She had lived a life of sin. Thirty-three years ago this woman was a young virgin about to be married when suddenly the announcement that God had chosen her to be the mother of God's Christ and King. While many have considered it to be a great honor to be the mother of the Lord, along with that honor came the realization that she would hold in her arms the man whose kingly throne would be the cross. And even if she were the only sinner on earth, God's gracious salvation would come in the form of her child who would have to die for her sins.

Others who knew what Mary knew and believed were there also. Others who knew were not there because they had run away. But three days later, God's King would rise victoriously from the dead and gather

his believers together with the tender assurance that because he lives, they also will live eternally. And by that same Gospel message, our Lord has gathered us together as well. For we know what this King's throne is the cross!

Real Jews knew this. Today, real Jews are called "Christians." Yet, like in Jesus' day, not all who called themselves Jews were real Jews, just as not all who call themselves Christians are truly Christians.

The Bible says: *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." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."* And we've also noted that even one of the criminals mocked and insulted Jesus. None of these Jews wanted anything to do with this kind of king. None of them wanted anything to do with Mary's Son.

Sadly, many who call themselves "Christians" even today want nothing to do with the amazing grace revealed on that throne of the cross. That is demonstrated in how they value the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. For it is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament that is the power of God for salvation, as Paul writes: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."* Ro 1

An example of what I mean came in the mail this past week. It's a brochure from "Life Church" here in Saginaw. To me this is a deplorable sneer at what is our King's Throne and his saving work. It's a promotion of their up-coming Christmas Eve service, and this is how they promote their congregation's worship service: CASUAL ATMOSPHERE, SHORT SERVICES, LOUD MUSIC, FUN FOR KIDS and then the warning: NO PERFECT PEOPLE ALLOWED. While this may appeal to the sensuality of our culture today, it offers no knowledge concerning the reason for the season of Christmas. The reason for the season of Christmas is to lift high the throne of our King, the Cross of Lent and Good Friday!

Now compare another brochure that came the same day from our Northwestern Publishing House, ALREADY promoting the Lenten Season that begins March 1. It is encouraging our congregations to consider a Lenten Series for 2017 entitled: REPENT: TURN TO JESUS!

Despite the sneers, there was one who did repent and turn to Jesus. The Bible says: *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."* Repentance is a miraculous change of heart. The heart of this man that earlier had joined in the ridicule was suddenly changed. Proof of this is in the fruit of this faith. First, he rebukes the sneers of the other criminal. Then he confesses his sins: *We are punished justly...* And then he defends Jesus, his Savior and King.

Then Scripture says that he turned to Jesus and pleaded: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* Here is a Jew whose former instruction in the Word of God welled up with a most comforting example of repentance and faith. For he calls Jesus by the name that means "Savior." Jesus means "Savior," and this man now knows and believes this. And he calls Jesus his King with the plea that he might graciously be accepted into his Kingdom even as he is about to die. What the hymn-writer pleads was happening to him: **Hold Thou thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!** And then, the Bible says: *Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The irony is that this repentant criminal would not be allowed through the doors of Life Church in Saginaw for they say: NO PERFECT PEOPLE ALLOWED. The irony of faith is that this repentant criminal was declared by Jesus to be perfect and sinless. That is what faith in Christ our King is about. God has made us holy through the forgiveness of sins won for us by our King's victory. All who believe this are of the Communion of Saints. We know this and we confess this in the Apostles' Creed.

There is no sneer or cynicism or doubt in the hearts and lives of those who know why our King's throne is the cross. Amen