
Hail the King! (Matthew 27:27-31)

11/26/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Could you imagine what it would be like if the president came here today? Like him or not, it would be a big deal. This room would be over-flowing with an eager audience. There would be excited whispers, “What’s he going to say?” “I can’t believe he came to our town!” Even more people would be outside hoping just to catch a glimpse of him.

But today, on Christ the King Sunday, our Gospel lesson gives a very different picture of our leader. Instead of standing room only for an eager audience, we see a room filled with soldiers preparing to carry out a death sentence. Instead of excited whispers, we hear cruel jokes and the gasps of a man being beaten. Instead of crowds of people outside that would be happy just for a glimpse, there were crowds of people outside who would not be happy till they saw this leader dead. But the biggest difference of all: we aren’t talking about a simple United States president; we are talking about the King of kings, the Ruler of the whole universe. We are talking about Jesus.

What kind of a king is this? A leader is supposed to be strong, not weak; victorious, not disgraced. A king is supposed to rule, not receive insults and torture! When people say to Jesus, “Hail the King,” it should be the most heartfelt expression of praise! But today, we read those words as a joke to make fun of Jesus! Why do we want to focus on this picture of Jesus on Christ the King Sunday? Why the soldiers mocking? Why the King suffering?

It’s because the Ruler of rulers, the Leader of leaders, is a different kind of King. He doesn’t fit our expectations. He doesn’t rule the way we would. Today, we will look at those words, “Hail the King,” from three different perspectives: as the sinner’s joke, as the world’s final confession, and as our true praise.

First, “Hail the King” as the sinner’s joke. The soldiers thought it was pretty funny. This pathetic excuse for a human claiming to be a king! They didn’t recognize Jesus as a king, let alone the King of kings! They thought it amusing that this Jesus would have any amount of power over them. They believed real power was in their swords and armor, in their governor Pontius Pilate. They believed power was theirs to use as they saw fit, even for cruelty toward this innocent man.

Why does it matter how the soldiers saw Jesus? Because all sinners want “Hail the King” to be nothing more than a joke. Because that is how the sinful natures in you and me want to look at Jesus. Our sinful natures don’t want Jesus to be King either.

Like the soldiers, we would rather find power in politics than in the King of kings. How many people can spend all day thinking, reading, or talking about politics, but, let's be honest, who's gonna spend that much time thinking, reading or talking about God's Word? We don't have time for that. We aren't comfortable with it. Why is that? Because our sinful nature doesn't recognize God's power.

Like the soldiers, we would rather serve our own desires than the King of kings. We easily find time to fit in our favorite pass-times and hobbies. But it's really hard to fit in that 10-minute devotion. It's pretty easy to wake up at 4 am for hunting or Black Friday shopping. We'll run ourselves ragged to get our kids to that sports event. We'll even take work off if there's a really big event. But, you know, church and Bible study are just at such inconvenient times. Why is that? Because our sinful natures are more devoted to a moment's pleasure than to the One True King.

Honestly, who wants to listen to a King that says we should consider other people more highly than ourselves, right? Who wants Jesus to be King when we can make our own life choices, when we can put ourselves and our happiness first, when we can blame everyone else for the world's problems and keep pretending that we are so good?

That's how our sinful nature looks at Jesus, as nothing more than a joke. It says, "Yeah, I'll give you Sunday morning, Jesus, if you have to have that, but my mind? My time? My life-style? My pride? My life? You aren't King of those things, Jesus." Our sinful nature does everything it can to reject Jesus as King of our lives.

It leads us to be hypocrites, who loudly condemn adultery, but fail to honor our own marriages by putting in the time and effort to keep them strong. We loudly condemn the unchurched world around us when we only spend about an hour a week in church and our minds aren't even there the whole time. We loudly condemn the sinful world around us when our own lives so poorly match what God tells us in his Word.

The world and our sinful natures want "Hail the King," to be nothing more than a joke, but one day it will be the world's final confession. One day, those soldiers who beat Jesus and laughed at him will stand before his judgment seat. One day, those hypocrites who claimed Jesus as their Lord but refused to consider him a priority will see how well their time really was spent. One day, those who laughed at the idea of Christ having any real power will stand before the King of kings. He will judge them according to what they deserve. And, on that day, they will obediently say, "Hail the King," and go away to eternal punishment.

But we still haven't really answered our big question, have we? Why do we see a beaten and disgraced Christ on Christ the King Sunday? Our sinful natures explain readily enough how the soldiers could be so cruel to Jesus, but why did Jesus take it? Why did Jesus endure such torture?

Jesus will come again one day and all people will be forced to acknowledge him as the One True King. So why didn't Jesus come with that glory and power at his first coming? It might have made so much more sense if Jesus came to conquer his enemies. Why did the God who made the earth itself open up to swallow a faithless and disobedient man, the God who brought fire down from heaven to destroy the depraved cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the God who destroyed the whole wicked world in a flood; why didn't this God come with force to make sinful humanity obey him or die?

Or think about this: Jesus was still Almighty God while those soldiers were torturing him, even while they were crucifying him! As God, Jesus was still sustaining those very soldiers with breath and health. Jesus was holding the very atoms that made up their bodies together as they were doing all these horrible things to him. At any moment, he could have just let his glory shine and instantly destroyed those wicked people so that everyone around could see exactly who they were dealing with. But he didn't. What kind of a king conceals his glory, and allows people weaker than himself to put him to death?

Certainly, the God who alone is good could not be publicly humiliated by sinful people. The God whom the whole universe cannot contain could not be held to a cross by a few nails. The God who is immortal could not have died. But He did. Why? Why did Jesus allow himself to be humiliated by these soldiers? Why did He allow nails to hold Him to that cross? Why did He die? Why did God come to earth for sinful people like you and me who don't want him as our king? Why is this the Gospel reading for Christ the King Sunday?

Grace. God's undeserved love and mercy for sinful humanity. Because he looks at each of us, corrupted and depraved sinners though we are, and instead of wanting us to get what we deserve, he loves us. He wants what is best for us, even though we do not deserve it. He wants us to be with him in paradise because it is best for us, even if we push away from him.

He is a King unlike any other. Jesus shows Himself to be our King, not with power, but with grace. It was grace that caused the Holy One to be humiliated in our place. It was grace that cause the Ever-Present One to be held to a cross by simple nails. It was grace that cause the Immortal One to die. It is grace that makes this rebellious heart put down my fist and kneel before the King. It is grace that

turns our “Hail the King” from a joke into true sincere praise. It is grace that makes the Almighty God see you in your sin, in your hatred, in your selfishness, and instead of giving you what you deserve, he wants to give you the best. He sees you stuck in your sinfulness and instead of punishment, he wants to set you free. And so he suffered and died in your place. He received what you deserve to remove your sins from you forever. He took our punishment so that we might instead get only the best from our God. And so, your sins truly have been forgiven.

This grace transforms us, from sinful rebels into God’s own people. This King builds his kingdom, not with loyal subjects but with his former enemies. When Jesus suffered and died on the cross, He did not do it for a bunch of holy saints, he did it for spiritually dead sinners who hate the idea of him as their King. But He still did it for us! That is God’s amazing grace that transforms us into his people. Because our God loves the unlovable. God’s grace works a miracle in us that changes us from God’s enemies into His beloved subjects. It makes us realize the error of our sinful ways, sins of our trusting in earthly power rather than in God’s power, sins of our devotion to the good life now instead of to our One True King. God’s grace creates in us a desire to live for God instead of living for ourselves and for merely earthly happiness!

This King of Grace shows us a whole new world that we never could have seen in our sinfulness. Where the world reads our Gospel lesson and sees a beaten, laughable disgrace, we see the Almighty God with even more powerful love. Where they see a dead man hanging on the cross, we see our sins hanging there dead. Where they see just a book with nice stories, we see the very power of God for the salvation of all who believe the message of the gospel!

This is how the King of grace changes us. We have a different King than the rest of the world. We can love and serve others without being repaid because we will never repay our God for his love and service. We can give up those earthly things we enjoy so much when we find they hinder our service and devotion to our One True King. We can trust in our God’s Word even when it seems like the whole world is falling apart because God alone is all-powerful.

This is Christ the King, who loves the unlovable, who frees those who would enslave themselves, who freely gives life to those who could never earn it. This is Christ the King. And we hail. We praise him, not as a joke, not just on the Last Day when all people will be forced to acknowledge him. We Hail the King now because he, the King of Grace, is a King like no other. Amen.