

I don't know if you're excited about the first son of Prince Charles of England getting engaged. I don't know if you're watching every bit and reading all the articles you can to find out what dress she'll wear, when they'll get married, and where. I don't know if you could care less and wouldn't be able to pick them out of a lineup. But people in England certainly care. They seem to know everything and want to know more. There's no question who the man who will be king is, and now everyone knows his son is getting married.

Knowing the king or queen has never really been a problem in England. Right now Charles is just a prince. No one mistakes him for the king. But he will be king, and then no one will mistake him for a prince anymore. William, Charles' first son, when he is king no one will make the mistake of not calling him king. Recognizing royalty is easy.

So why did the people gathered around the crosses that day have so much trouble? It sure wasn't obvious to anyone that one of the criminals hanging there was a king. Sure the sign said it, but it didn't seem possible. We've looked through their eyes and seen that man hanging on the cross. We've stood there as he died. But if all we're looking with is eyes of this world, we'll never see him for what he truly is. The gospel this morning leads us to...

**Recognize Christ the King  
Dying for sinners  
Promising to sinners**

No one is going to mistake me for a NFL player. I think it's pretty obvious why. If you'd see me run, jump, or try to tackle it would be clear I'm no football player. But if people didn't know me or they didn't know you, would some of them believe you if you told them you were? Jesus had spent his entire ministry of three years teaching and preaching to the people. Many of them watched as he did miracles and spoke with authority. Still he didn't do the things they expected him to do. Now that he was hanging from the cross their suspicions were confirmed. **"Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."** Dripping with sarcasm, the religious leaders could see that Jesus wasn't the Messiah, he was no king.

Everyone knew who they waited for. The Messiah, the Christ, the Chosen One of God. The prophets told them he would be a king. Jeremiah prophesied in the first lesson, **"The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a king, who will reign wisely."** They waited for the Christ, the anointed one. Everyone knew when the Messiah came he would be anointed by God, set apart to do something special. Chosen One indicated how special the Messiah would be. People would recognize God's love towards this person. So they waited for these signs. Jesus demonstrated none of this; at least not on the cross. In their eyes he was nothing. In fact he was getting what he deserved. No one could just claim to be God and not get punished.

It was the theme of all the taunts. **"Let him save himself...If you are the king of the Jews save yourself...Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself!"** The religious leaders, soldiers, even the criminals joined in the mocking. Is it too much of a stretch to think we would've demanded the same sign? We do today when we think, "I just wish Jesus would show himself in some way then I would believe." Of course, we also see the pain and suffering that those mocking didn't care about. We would rather have Jesus off the cross than on. Our cries sound no different. "Save yourself Jesus, avoid the suffering, come off the cross. This is no way to die."

What no one standing near the cross seemed to recognize was Christ the King dying for sinners. The cross was absolutely necessary. So was the suffering and the taunts. He had to experience it all, reach the bottom of suffering. He had to know despair and hopelessness. Finally he had to experience separation from God. Everything the Scriptures had promised about the future Messiah was happening. Christ was winning for an entire world of sinners' forgiveness. He was repairing a relationship once severed. It cost the life of Christ the King. It was his cross to bear for you and me. Jesus was never going to answer the shouts or come down off the cross. Saving himself would mean death for them and death for us. Dying for sinners was the only way to save sinners.

Few portions of Scripture are as heart-warming as the thief on the cross. We see a little bit of ourselves in that thief. He was paying the ultimate price for his actions in the slowest and most agonizing way possible. But he recognized something about Jesus. Something about the things he was saying, about the way he acted, something about the way he was dying. The thief saw not with his own eyes anymore. The Holy Spirit gave him eyes of faith to see Jesus for who he really was, Christ the King. And Christ did even more for him. Christ the King made a promise to him and all sinners from the cross.

Imagine these two criminals luck. Here they were, both dying for actions considered worthy of death, no way out, no escape, no appeals, and no excuses. That was until they found themselves hanging on the cross with the one everyone else called the King of the Jews. Perhaps they already had prior knowledge about Jesus or perhaps they simply followed what everyone else was saying. Either way, they begged for release. **"Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"** No trace of feeling sorry. Certainly no desire for Jesus to give them more than life.

Only a truly changed heart could say what one of those criminals did. **“Don’t you fear God? We are punished justly. This man has done nothing wrong.”** He stood up for Jesus. The soldiers, the religious leaders, everyone who mocked Jesus received the rebuke. He saw his Savior being trampled and couldn’t stand it anymore. Even if he died, he deserved it. No covering up his sin with excuses. With death mere moments away he confessed his sin and humbly cried, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** This can only mean he accepted Jesus not for what he saw, but what his eyes of faith saw, Christ the King.

Death could be mere moments away for us as well today. Sin is going to cause our death. Look again at the one hanging in the middle. Love led Jesus to the cross for us. Undeserved love to pay the price for our sins. And pure love led him to make the promise. Hear those words because they’re spoken to you too. It’s a promise that will make all the difference in our lives today. A promise that draws us even closer to Jesus. If your soul is hurting today, if you’re wondering if heaven is yours, if you doubt whether God loves you at all listen to this promise, **“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”** Stop doubting and believe Jesus’ words. Death will not be the end. Those who trust in the promise of Christ the King from the cross are heading to paradise.

The forgiven criminal could literally do nothing to pay Jesus back for the promise. Jesus wouldn’t have it any other way. Paying for the gift only cheapens it. You have opportunity, not to pay for Christ’s gift, but to demonstrate your belief in it. Offer thanks, live thanks, speak words of thanks. Share the promise with others. Let people see how important Christ is to you. Prioritize your schedule this Christmas season. Carve out time to worship your newborn King. Set aside money to demonstrate your faith in Christ. Tell others that Christ the King is all in all to you.

Kings are recognized by crowns, scepters, power, and prestige. None of that was visibly on display the day Jesus died on the cross. He wore no crown and displayed no outward power. His followers ran and those people who came only mocked him. Had we been there our eyes would have only recognized a humiliated human dying a lonely death. But with eyes of faith even today we can recognize him as he dies for sinners. We recognize him in the promises he makes to sinners. We recognize Christ the King.