

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of our liturgical year. The last Sunday before advent.

Christ the King Sunday is not an ancient celebration like Christmas or Easter or Pentecost or even Trinity Sunday. The celebration of Christ the King Sunday is not even one hundred years old – in fact, Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in his encyclical *Quas primas* in 1925, and he did so in response to growing secularism and secular ultra-nationalism of the time.

It was originally celebrated on the last Sunday of October – the Sunday before All Saints Day – but in 1970 it was moved to the last Sunday of Ordinary Time the end of the liturgical year – and the Sunday before Advent.

Our gospel reading today is very familiar. We know how it fits in context: There was the last supper, Judas left, Jesus retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane with his closest friends. But then he drew away from Peter, James and John, to pray by himself. Then Judas identified Jesus to the religious officials and he was arrested, he was dragged before the Annas and Caiaphas, before Pilate and Herod, he was beaten and humiliated. He was deserted by his followers. Denied by his closest friend. He was made to carry his cross to Calvary, to the place of the Skull, and there he was crucified – that’s how our gospel reading opened: “When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.”

It seems strange for our lectionary compilers to have chosen this reading for Christ the King Sunday. Because Christ the King Sunday recognises the kingship of Jesus – it recognises the triumph of Jesus, how the anointed one – the messiah, the christ – becomes king over all creation. It points to the end of time when the kingdom of Jesus will be established in all its fullness to the ends of the earth. And Christ the King Sunday leads us into the season of Advent, when the Church anticipates Christ’s return to put all things right.

But today, even as we celebrate Jesus as King, we come again to see him crucified. Verse 35: The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

The people did not recognize Jesus as their King sent by God. They mocked and insulted him. They challenged him to come down from the cross if he really was the Christ, God’s chosen one.

Because God promised long ago that he would send his people a king who would redeem them. In our Old Testament reading for today we hear one of God’s promises regarding the king he would send. Jeremiah the prophet writes (23:5), “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.”

Jesus had had promise of course. The multitudes had come to listen to him. He’d attracted crowds of followers. He’d challenged those in authority. He’d upset the social order. And in the last week he’d made his way to Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish power, and the crowds had lined the approach to the city gates crying “Hosanna!” in recognition of him as the expected messiah.

We know that he was, of course, the messiah... but not the messiah the people had expected – the messiah who would arrive in Jerusalem, drive out the Romans, and re-establish David’s kingdom. Instead, the messiah was bloodied and beaten man that was hanging on the cross.

The Roman soldiers, far from simply following Pilate’s orders, joined in the ridicule: The gospels of Matthew (27:28-29), Mark (15:17) and John (19:2) tells us that they put a crown of thorns and a robe on him, and knelt down before him in mock worship, and we read here in Luke that “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." (36:37)

The people gathered there couldn't see that by going through what he was going through Jesus was doing what the Christ, messiah, was sent here to do. Many of them – if not most of them – would have been familiar with the prophecy from Isaiah

They forgot the words of Isaiah the prophet who said (53:3-5), "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

And so, the king was on the cross. In agony, in anguish, hanging there, looking down on those who were mocking him – the crowds and the Roman soldiers. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Modern society often tells us that ignorance is no excuse... we like to see people held to account for their actions, we like to see people punished for their wrongdoings, but instead Jesus is saying forgive them: They don't know. And they didn't know, perhaps, the significance of what they were doing. I always wonder how many of the people gathered at the crucifixion, or how many of those who cried "crucify him" earlier on that Friday, had been greeting him as the Messiah and shouting 'hosanna!' only a few days before.

He was supposed to be their king... he was on course to be their king... but it was as true in first century Judea as it is today: A week is a long time in politics.

The crowd's cries of hope had turned to cries of ridicule. The cries of 'hosanna' – literally 'save us' had become mocking cries of 'save yourself'.

Sure enough, there was a sign above Jesus, which Luke tells us read: this is the king of the jews. That sign was Pilate's doing... John's gospel (19:19-20) gives us further information "Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: jesus of nazareth, the king of the jews... the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek."

It seems clear that Pilate was joining in mocking Jesus... but even as he made fun of Jesus, he was speaking the truth: This is the king of the jews.

It reminds me a lot of the meeting of the Sanhedrin described in John chapter 11, where Caiaphas, the high priest says, "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." And John goes on to explain "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation" (John 11:50-51).

Even as Caiaphas was plotting against Jesus, he was prophesying the way God's plan for the restoration of all things would be fulfilled.

So the king was on the cross.

And on either side of him, was another cross, and on each of those crosses hung another condemned man. Luke tells us that they were criminals, one on his right, one on his left. We don't know their names, we don't know their crimes, presumably they were serious crimes, because they had been condemned too. Condemned to die the same death as Jesus.

One of the criminals joined in the mockery of Jesus: One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (23:39)

The people watching had mocked Jesus with "let him save himself", and the Roman soldiers had followed suit "If you are the king of the Jews," they'd sneered, "save yourself."

The criminal, just in case, added a bit "Save yourself and us!". I don't think he was expecting Jesus to save him... but just in case he could... "Save yourself and us!".

But the criminal on the other side of Jesus didn't join in the mockery. In fact, he rebuked the first criminal "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."

He recognised Jesus' innocence. And he recognised God's sovereignty. "Don't you fear God?". You're about to meet him. And you and I deserve to be here... but this man doesn't.

By God's grace this criminal recognised his own guilt and Jesus' innocence. By God's grace, he recognised the truth of the sign that Pilate had placed above the man crucified next to him: this is the king of the Jews. This man, this Jesus, may have been bloody and beaten, but he was, truly, the Christ, the messiah. The king on the cross.

The man had not been with Jesus very long, only a few hours, but it was long enough. He had watched Jesus suffer and heard him pray for the forgiveness of his executioners. He heard the ridicule and the mockery, he shared in the cruelty of the Roman soldiers, and he would have seen the satisfied gloating of the Jewish leaders.

In Jesus, he saw the king on the cross. Despite Jesus' situation, he recognised Jesus' authority. He recognised Jesus of Nazareth - the King of the Jews, the promised Messiah, the Son of God and long-awaited King.

And having recognised the king on the cross, he turned to him in faith and in hope.

Verse 42: Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

It wasn't the mocking "Save yourself...and us" of the other criminal, but it was him trusting that there was something more – something bigger than their current situation. When he was in front of Pilate, Jesus had said "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36)

The criminal couldn't do anything to earn a place in God's kingdom. He couldn't make amends for his crimes, he couldn't give to charity, or do good deeds. He didn't even pray a prayer of repentance or ask forgiveness for what he'd done wrong.

He just simply turned to Jesus: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And in verse 43 we hear Jesus' response: Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

There was nothing more for him to say, the criminal had asked to be remembered and Jesus assured him: "...today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus assured that condemned criminal of a place in his kingdom. Despite his crimes, despite his circumstances, despite of his inability to make amends, Jesus assured him of a place in his kingdom.

That assurance gave the criminal comfort even as he was dying, it gave him hope even beyond his imminent death.

We have the same hope and comfort. God tells us that all who believe in his Son will have everlasting life in the kingdom of heaven. Although Pilate's sign on the cross read "this is the king of the Jews", Jesus is our king too. He is the king of all those who turn to him in faith – those who turn to him and say "Remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus was wounded and bruised for us, he took our place and bore the sins of the world, he suffered our punishment. The king on the cross atoned for the sins of the world. He opened the gates of everlasting life not only for the dying criminal hanging next to him but also for you and me.

Jesus is the king of all people. Take comfort in knowing this. Our king has promised to never leave us or forsake us. Paul writes "...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:37-39)

Nothing can separate us from the love of God shown by the king on the cross.

A king not like the kings of the world. To the eyes of the world there was no way that Jesus was the king that they were waiting for. The people could not see that by their actions and even by their mockery, were proving that Jesus was the promised king sent by God. They could not see that by suffering and dying on the cross Jesus was doing exactly what the Christ, the Messiah, was sent here to do. They'd forgotten the words of the prophets.

The people looked for a victorious king with a crown of gold on a regal throne – not for a suffering king with a crown of thorns raised up on a criminal's cross.

He promises that he will control all things for our good. And he gives us the same promise as he gave to the thief hanging next to him. Our king promises and tells us, "You will be with me in paradise."

Amen.