

A Sermon at the Cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"

John 19:19-22

Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. ²¹Therefore the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'He said, "I am the King of the Jews."'" ²²Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

Beloved in the Lord,

This evening we continue to cast light upon the crucifixion of Jesus, making our way from crown of thorns and scarlet robe, to cross and nails. Tonight we find ourselves still at the cross, where the Lord of Life is nailed, bearing our sins. Around Him men continue to mock and scoff. Others, strangers, who drawn perhaps by the agitation of the crowd, or the public spectacle of an execution so near the city, find three men, hanging from the wooden beams. What have they done that they should deserve such a cruel fate? Above their heads are signs, written in the local speech and the tongues of trade and government, declare the accusation. Two of them say "lehstes" a word which can mean robber, brigand, or revolutionary. It was not petty thievery or even grand robbery of which these men were guilty, for thieves were stoned, not crucified. They could only be those very rebels of whom we hear in Mark 15:7, who committed murder during their rebellion. A third man, Barabbas by name, was arrested with them for the same crime. He was scheduled to be put to death. By all rights he should be hanging there with these two rebels, yet the third inscription does not read "lehstes". Strangely, Barabbas had been set free. In his place is Jesus. As to what Jesus had done that He would be crucified between two murdering rebels, the inscription above his head told the story. He was crucified because He was the King of the Jews.

Behold Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. For such He is but to death. Even to this day, it is customary, during our executions, that the charges against a criminal are first read. In this way society is declaring, "Thus shall we treat all who commit a crime like unto the one this man has committed." In the case of a crucifixion, where death was long and delayed, the proclamation of the crime had a greater effect. In the case of Jesus, however, this charge is unique. No one else *could* be guilty of this charge. Only Jesus could sit upon the throne of His father, David. Only Jesus was born King of the Jews.

It is remarkable that a man like Pilate, who only recently declared, "What is truth?" would write the truth, and cause it to be displayed upon the cross of Jesus. Though Satan had orchestrated this death through the priests and Pharisees, when

all was said and done, the grace of God was made manifest on that day, and Satan's likes were put to silence. Here is the hand of God at work, even among a pagan such as Pilate. God's truth is what it is, for the truth is still the truth, even when it is preached by an unbeliever.

The priests and Pharisees, whose duty it was to uphold the truth, were offended at the inscription of the cross of Jesus. "Do not write that! Write, 'He said, "I am King of the Jews."'" That would be a crime fitting a crucifixion: high treason against the government of Rome. For Pilate's inscription to stand would be to declare to everyone that this man is being crucified *because* He is the King of the Jews. But Pilate was a stubborn man. This was his little coup against the manipulation of these haughty priests. They may have gotten their way in crucifying Jesus, but Pilate would have the last word. The inscription stood, and the truth prevailed.

The name of Jesus is given as "Jesus of Nazareth." The name Nazareth is critical, because it specifically identifies *which* King Jesus is. The prophets had declared that "He shall be called a Nazarene" (Mat. 2:23). Matthew says that the "prophets" have declared this, meaning more than one. There is no single prophet who says that "He shall be called a Nazarene." Yet, together, the prophets do indeed say this, and what they say is extraordinary. The word "Nazareth" is from the Hebrew word "Natser", which means Branch. This is the name given to Christ in Isaiah, 11:1. There is another Hebrew word, a synonym, "tsamakh", which also means Branch. This word is likewise used as a name of Christ. Using this word, Zechariah declares, "Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, And He shall build the temple of the LORD; Yes, He shall build the temple of the LORD. He shall bear the glory, And shall sit and rule on His throne; So He shall be a priest on His throne" (Zechariah 6:12,13). Likewise Jeremiah declares, "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. 23:5,6). The prophets of old join together their voices, and declare that Christ the King, the Son of David, would be called the Branch. Throughout the New Testament, He is known as Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, the Branch. Here, at last, the words of the prophets are made manifest upon the throne of the tree: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". Whatever Pilate's intent, the inscription above Jesus' head has only one possible meaning for anyone who believed the Scriptures: Here we crucify Christ.

This was the accusation at His trial before the High Priests where He confessed to be the Christ and before Pilate where He confessed to be an other-worldly King. Now it is de-

clared that this is the cause of His crucifixion, and that too is the truth. Though the means by which Jesus was sentenced were wicked: treachery, lies, false witness, and fear, the Father in heaven was at work, making of the cruel injustice of men into the greatest work which He ever performed. Long before the Jews cried out, "Crucify Him!" the Father ordained from eternity, that Christ, the Lamb of God, must be slain.

What king of this world would ever be found upon a cross? None but the King who bears the sins of the world. None but the King, who upon His throne is also a priest, as Zechariah declared, and with those two offices joined together, Priest and King, He brings peace to men. Here the Scriptures are fulfilled. Even as God's will was done as He was crucified by sinful men, so also His glory and truth were declared as His inscription was written by a callous pagan. For this cause, Jesus is crucified, that He might bring peace unto men.

He was called the King of the Jews, yet this declaration was written in three languages: Hebrew-Aramaic, the language spoken by the common Jew, [Aramaic was the common speech of the Jews, yet this inscription is the same in both languages], Greek, the language of learning and trade, and Latin, the language of government and empire. What He does here is not for the Jews only, but for all the world, and therefore the inscription declares it to all the world. It would not be long after this, on the day of Pentecost, that the apostles would preach Christ Crucified in languages from many nations, but here, upon the cross, is the sermon from which all others flow.

Here is the Law of God in its most brutal and naked form. There are no gentle words spoken, to soften the blow. The hammer of God strikes now upon His Son, Jesus, showing to men the wages of sin. If this is the punishment due, how great indeed must be the offense. Who can trivialize their own sin when at the cross of Jesus? There no sin is small, no offense insignificant, for each of them has brought upon Jesus this torment and death.

But here too is the Gospel. Above His head His innocence is declared, for what He is charged with is no crime, but absolution from any wrong of which men might think to accuse Him. Here too the inscription proclaims the love of God for sinful men, and Jesus, even in His agony, confirms that love seven-fold, as He speaks words of grace. From his absolution, "Father forgive them" to His wretched cry, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" which reveals the depths of hell to which Jesus descended that we might be saved, He shows God's love. One man, one of the rebels who were crucified, was so struck by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that He asked absolution from the King of Kings, "Remember me in your Kingdom, Lord", and Jesus pronounced it upon Him, "Today you shall be with me in Paradise." At the end Jesus cried out, "It is finished" and thereby preached the forgiveness of sins to the entire world.

What a tremendous sermon indeed, written in eternity

from whence the Father ordained these things, preached in prophecy, revealed at the Cross, and evermore declared by the Apostles, and by every saint, that Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews and of all men, was crucified for the sins of the world, that we might have eternal life.

As you pass the cross, do not let this sermon in wood and ink and blood fall on deaf ears which pay no heed to the one who suffers for you. See Him dying on the tree. He is the Branch, the Man from Nazareth, whom the Father promised. He is your King, and could rightly be your accuser, yet He bears your sins and dies for you. Hear Him, and believe His Word, and you shall have life. Amen.