

**“Who Is Jesus and What is the Nature of His Reign?”**

**(A Dramatic Sermon)**

**Luke 23:33–43**

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I realize you may think I was just trying to save my own skin, either in this life or the next, and if I was, you really couldn't blame me. Could you? You're welcome to think what you want; people always seem to do so anyway. But I knew I was going to die on that cross. The Romans were very efficient, especially with executions. And I didn't have any expectation of an afterlife. I just thought the poor guy, Jesus, that is, was getting nasty verbal abuse from everyone, abuse he did not deserve and didn't need on top of the brutal physical torture we were all receiving on the way to our deaths.

Of course, the Roman soldiers mocked him, saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was a sign over him which read, “This is the King of the Jews.” After people cast lots to divide his clothing, some religious leaders also scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” Even the other guy who was being crucified with us, who, like me, deserved punishment of some kind, if not death, kept saying facetiously, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

You would have thought he would have had some sense knocked into his thick skull by now, but apparently not! So, I said, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

I did say, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” But I wasn't expecting that response, I didn't even know what it meant. I just felt like he was being mistreated, and I knew something about how he had lived, the kind of world or realm or kingdom he seemed to have been about in this life.

Jesus was a kind and compassionate man who spent his life addressing the needs of others. He healed people, he taught them about goodness and God. He extended acceptance and love to people others rejected or at least viewed as inferior — lepers, Gentiles, women, children, demoniacs, even criminals, prisoners, like me. For goodness sakes, he even asked forgiveness for the very people who were putting him to death while they were putting him to death! “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” That’s what he said...

I can’t speak to other claims people have made about him. I noticed that in one of your readings today, something called Colossians, many claims are made about Jesus — God’s beloved son, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the head of the church, the firstborn from the dead, the one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and in whom God reconciles all things to Godself.

I don’t know about all of that... I’m not even sure what some of it means... It sounds more like a formal creed or hymn than the thoughts of one person. I can only speak to what I know, which is pretty incredible, so I’m not dismissing any of these claims. I’m just saying there was something special about this man, and they were putting him to death, alongside us, and spitting insults at *him*. It didn’t make sense.

Who do you think he is? And what informs your thinking? Is it based on what somebody told you, something you read, something you experienced and felt in your heart? I’m not dismissing any of this. Who am I to question anyone’s beliefs? It just seems that there is a great deal at stake here. Who is this guy, and if he is a king, over what kind of kingdom does he rule?

It would have to be an upside-down sort of kingdom, though not like the upside-down of your “Stranger Things.” That upside-down, with all its violence and trauma, seems like the world I lived in, perhaps yours too. Jesus was about turning all that upside-down, we might say right-side-up, how things are supposed to be, but not like they are.

I don’t know about your world, but in mine, might ruled, and ruled with impunity. The loudest voices were heard. Those who were born into power and privilege kept their places and those who were not were destined to be left out. Victims of every kind — sickness, poverty,

persecution, imprisonment, any disability or different ability — were viewed with callous indifference as responsible for their own suffering.

Jesus sought to change all of this, and some of how he sought to do so was straightforward. He healed sick people, gave sight to the blind, enabled the lame to walk. But he also said things that irritated people with power and privilege, telling parables in which the rich and powerful didn't fare so well. And he challenged people who used positions of power to exploit the weak and vulnerable. He did so because there was no other way to set things right, but not surprisingly, he ended up next to me on a cross. Yet even that seemed to be part of his plan.

How can you change the world if you die? What kind of power does a dying man have? What kind of king over what kind of kingdom was this guy? Well, strange as it may seem, I got the feeling that he would still change the world, he had power even in weakness. In fact, there wasn't anything truly weak about him. He knew who he was and what he was doing. He had a quiet confidence about him. He wasn't fooled by people who thought they were important. Nothing could force him to change his beliefs.

I gather that he had talked a lot about service, putting others first, laying down life even. Well... I was afraid he would check that box pretty soon. Then what? I didn't know. But there was something about the look in his eye. He was in pain like us, though he also hurt for the tragic ignorance of the world, but somehow, he seemed to know he wasn't done, he wasn't defeated, his way or mission would still prevail.

The truth is leaders had come and gone over the years. Different political realms had controlled our people. From time to time, various reformers and revolutionaries came along. But they all played the same basic cards, variations of the same theme of worldly power, and in the end, nothing really changed. Perhaps it was time for a different approach. Our world was such a mess, so brutal, so unjust.

How are things in your world? Not so good... well... What needs to change? What would you do? Not so fast, you know the definition of insanity. Different people using the same kind of power isn't changing anything. Changing who is in and who is out and thus who is to blame won't improve anything. Empires come in different forms, political and

religious, they all control and oppress. But no one can control what is in your heart. Perhaps that's what Jesus had in mind, where he intended to rule, in the heart; to change the way you feel, what you care about, and ultimately how you live, and through you, how the world works.

It may seem strange for me to be lecturing you, a common criminal talking to well-dressed church folk. If it makes a difference, I have been to Paradise, Jesus' Paradise, not the one in the Eagles' song. But all I really have is my experience with Jesus, mostly dying beside him in a humiliating way. In the end, that's all you have, your experience with him. What does that experience tell you about who he is and how he would have you to live? What does it say about his kingdom?

Perhaps it has something to do with clothing and feeding people in need and bringing joy to children and families at Christmas with toys and gift cards. Perhaps it has something to do with crying with each other in times of sadness, praying for the sick, and spending time with the elderly and lonely. Perhaps it has something to do with speaking up for people who have no voice, listening to people who just need to be heard, setting aside self-interest and ego to make room for people with different needs and views.

If it's really connected to the Jesus I knew, this realm will be truly different than anything else we know. It will be full of kindness and holiness, everyone will be embraced, and somehow God will be honored in the process, not embarrassed, as God must be by so much of what we say and do in God's name.

You have read words I heard as a child in synagogue before I went astray, words from the prophet Jeremiah, something about God raising up for David a righteous Branch, one who would reign as king and deal wisely, execute justice and righteousness in the land. Judah would be saved, and Israel would live in safety. And the name by which this leader would be called would be — the Lord is our righteousness.

Could that have been a vision of Jesus? Wisdom, justice, righteousness... add in a little mercy and kindness, I mean, even I was included in his concern, a man on death row. Perhaps. Perhaps that's who Jesus is — a righteous Branch, the image of the invisible God, the one in who God reconciles all things to Godself, including me, and you.