

"The Title on the Cross"—John 19:19-22

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, "The Title on the Cross", is John 19:19-22 → *Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

You walk in the door and immediately find yourself at the registration table. As you stand in what seems to be a rather short line for what seems to be a long time, you feel your patience being tried. "What's taking so long?" you think to yourself. Then you notice the registrants bent over the table filling out name tags. Actually it's simple to write down your name, the town in which you live and, if it's a "church" function, the church of which you are a member. It's those people who have to be so artistic and creative with their label, using every shade of color in the rainbow, who are holding up the line!

Such labels as name tags, ID lanyards and placards with your name and other information on them are important. They explain your presence in a particular context as well as what role you perform and the position you fill in that context. Not only do they help you all function together properly but they also give validity to your presence in that context. In one respect, it was no different on the mount of crucifixion. It's just that the only ones with name tags were the ones hanging on the crosses, and our text tells us what the placard above Jesus' head said about him: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*. (cf. verse 19)

To place a sign on the cross stating why a criminal was to be crucified was very common. It actually served a twofold purpose. Along with identifying the person being crucified it was meant to advertise his crime as a warning to all who witnessed the crucifixion. Part of the punishment connected with breaking the law was placing the individual before the public eye, thus producing more shame in the guilty person. In our culture such notices are published in the newspaper in an effort for members of our community to hold one another accountable for their actions and, in effect say, "Shame on you!"

However, Pilate's *inscription* above Jesus on the cross may have been a way of "mocking" the Jews who placed Pilate in a very compromising situation with this *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*. Since the Sanhedrin wanted Jesus killed but couldn't do it

themselves, there only hope was the Roman government. Pontius Pilate was the Roman appointed governor in Jerusalem so these Jewish religious leaders took Jesus to Pilate. *Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"* He tried to get them to deal with Jesus themselves since he himself could *find no guilt in Him*. We are told in John 19:12 that *Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."*

When questioning Jesus Pilate asked Him in Matthew 27:11 → *Are you the King of the Jews?* to which Jesus replied, *"You have said so."* Jesus told him about His kingdom during one of Pilate's inquisitions. (cf. John 18:33-38) Apparently the soldiers thought of Jesus as the King of the Jews as they mocked Him by giving Him a crown of thorns, a fake scepter and a purple robe. (cf. John 19:1-3) Thus, what else could Pilate have written except the title, *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews?* He had nothing else upon which he could "hang his hat" of justice and even this was debatable!

Even the protest to this *inscription by the chief priests of the Jews* is curious because Matthew records the Jewish religious leaders mocking Him while standing below the cross by saying: *He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him.* (cf. Matthew 27:42) Really? Earlier they confessed: *We have no king but*

Caesar. (cf. John 19:15) Actually, Jesus did them one better! He was taken down from the cross dead and then rose from the dead three days later . . . and still many of the Jewish religious leaders refused to believe in Him as their Savior, *King of kings and Lord of lords*. (cf. 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16; Acts 3-5)

What about you? Do you believe in Jesus as your Savior, *King of kings and Lord of lords*? The *inscription* which Pilate had fastened to the cross of Jesus said much more about the Person and Work of Jesus than he realized.

Jesus truly was a king. When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary he said in Luke 1:32-33 → *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end*. A star given by God revealed Him as *the King of the Jews* to the wise men.

As many of the Jews were looking for God's king to be a powerful redeemer and nationalistic deliverer of His people, Jesus' rule as king in God's kingdom is much different. Once *being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come*, Jesus answered them, "*The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is within you.*"

We pray for this kingdom to come among us also every time we pray “Thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer. The meaning given to this 2nd Petition in the Small Catechism says: “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” It is a kingdom which lasts forever because of the rule of God’s grace in the hearts of His people by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel!

Jesus certainly is *the King* Who desires to rule in the hearts and lives of **all people** so that they will believe in Him as their Savior **from sin**, confess Him as Lord of their lives and submit to Him as their King. I wonder how we who have been brought up in a democratic society can even fathom a monarchical system of government in which we serve the king’s wishes. In such a system you might even work so he can get paid, not you. That just not happening!

When viewing Jesus on cross one might think the title above Him should read: “Jesus of Nazareth, Savior from sin.” “King” may be stretching it a little too far for many Christians who want to bask in His forgiveness of sins for them but really don’t want to allow Him to rule their actions and behavior in their daily lives by His commands. Or if they do think of Him as king and lord it’s only insofar as how He protects me, provides for my wants and makes life comfortable for me.

What about you? Do you believe in Jesus as your Savior, *King of kings and Lord of lords*? At the foot of His cross you see your Savior Who said that He *came not to be served but to serve you and to give His life as a ransom for you*! (cf. Mark 10:45) You see Him on that cross serving you by taking the punishment which your sins deserve. You see Him on that cross serving you a new relationship with God by turning His wrath toward your sin away from you and on to Himself. You see the very King of heaven serving you in grace and love!

In repentance and faith you move through His cross to look back and see that it is empty with no *inscription* on it anymore. You see and confess Jesus as Lord, to Whom has been given *all authority in heaven and on earth* (cf. Matthew 28:18). You bow the knee in humble submission to *Him, Who is the head of all rule and authority* (cf. Colossians 2:10) and at Whose name *every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. (cf. Philippians 2:10-11) You see the *King of kings and Lord of lords* and respond to His grace in obedience to His command in Luke 17:10 → *So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,

keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.