

What do you think of when you hear the word paradise? Maybe a beautiful beach on holiday, or a wonderful meal, or like it's middle eastern origins, a beautiful garden full of flowers and trees, lakes and waterfalls?

We heard in our gospel reading King Jesus saying to a criminal crucified alongside him – today you will be with me in paradise. It's Christ the King Sunday – concluding our readings in the gospel of Luke with a final statement about how King Jesus is God's way of ruling in this world and in the world to come.

It's not been a good week to be a monarch – we can only imagine the conversations that took place in Buckingham Palace between the Queen and Prince Andrews – we can only hope that Prince Philip was well out the way. Wordly leaders, even though they don't have the title of King – might assume the role. In 2018 the Chinese National People's Congress made Xi Jinping leader for life. He is 'king' in all but name. In America, President Trump argues that the US constitution gives him unlimited power as well as immunity from prosecution: 'I have the right to do whatever I want as President' (July 2019). Jesus' kingship is a very different shape!

The Biblical titles of Jesus Son of God, Messiah, and King have been so thoroughly absorbed as words for church and worship that their simple, earthly force is largely lost. Jesus' crucifixion, however, did not occur on an altar between two candles, but outside the city between two convicts on a dismal executioner's hill, called "The Skull." The Gospel is the story of how Jesus the Messiah of God brought God's reign of justice and mercy to earth, and Luke's account presents the crucified Messiah enacting God's reign, surrounded by mocking, brutal violence. Here is no triumphalist King, as some of our worship songs might indicate, but rather than triumph there is grace, invitation, compassion with those who suffer, kindly friendship. What might this gospel reading say to us today about the nature of Jesus kingship and his invitation to us to be with him in paradise.

Let's have a look at the scene. Stating only that Jesus was crucified alongside two criminals (verse 33), Luke's narration does not dwell on the mechanics of crucifixion. Luke's audience would have been aware of its horrific details. Unique to Luke's account did you notice how Jesus is ridiculed three times (echoes of his temptations?) – here by the Jewish leaders (v35), by the Roman Soldiers (v36-37) and then by one of the two criminals (v39). challenges us to expand our notions of who deserves mercy. The passage is structured around three instances of mockery levelled against Jesus (verses 35, 36, 39). Nevertheless, the mockeries communicate how dismal things have become for Jesus. These taunts get closer and closer to him, giving the reader a sense that the forces against Jesus are closing in on him. The Jewish leaders are close enough for Jesus to hear them; the soldiers, who had already taken his garments (verse 34b), come up to Jesus as they mock him; and the final act of derision comes from someone right next to Jesus.

Each of these taunts challenges Jesus to save himself as a demonstration of his identity. In their calls for Jesus to demonstrate his power to save, the leaders, the soldiers, and the criminal address him with titles that from their perspective add to the ridicule but represent valid affirmations of Jesus' identity for Luke and his readers ("Messiah of God," Luke 23:35, 39; "chosen one," verse 35 "King of the Jews," verses 37, 38). They ironically pronounce Christian truths about Jesus without realizing it, unable to see that Jesus' identity as "Messiah," "chosen one," and "King" is inextricably linked to his crucifixion. The salvation Jesus offers takes place through the cross, not apart from it.

The taunting Jesus receives from the criminal offends the other criminal crucified with Jesus. This second criminal accepts that they are "condemned justly" and deserve their punishment, whereas Jesus "has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). How he knows that Jesus is innocent is not indicated, but his statement continues Luke's emphasis on Jesus' innocence (23:4, 14-15, 22, 47). Nor is it stated what the criminals had done.

Instead, Luke focuses on how these criminals position themselves before Jesus while in their guilty state. The first criminal joins the others in spurning Jesus and demands that Jesus save them all from being crucified (Luke 23:39). Luke presents this criminal's actions as a serious affront against Jesus,

using *blasphemeo* to narrate his act of deriding Jesus (literally he “kept blaspheming” Jesus). The second criminal also asks something of Jesus, but his earnest request contrasts the first criminal’s selfish, impertinent demand. While others in the scene use titles to mock Jesus, showing they do not really believe Jesus to be Messiah and King, this second criminal accepts in utter sincerity the inscription’s identification of Jesus as “King” (verse 38), asking that he be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom (verse 42; see also Psalm 106:4-5). He speaks to Jesus in a startlingly personal and intimate fashion, addressing Jesus directly by name and not with a sarcastic use of a title.

In response, Jesus grants him salvation. Jesus’ words in Luke 23:43 begin with an “Amen” saying (literally “Amen to you I say”) that introduces his “today” pronouncement with a solemn assertiveness. Placed for emphasis immediately after the “Amen” saying is the word “today” (*semeron*), which appears at key points in Luke’s Gospel to describe the arrival of Jesus’ salvation in the world (2:11; 4:21; 19:9). Its last occurrence in Luke occurs here, at the cross from which Jesus’ salvation becomes a reality to this criminal and a possibility to any of “the lost” (see also 19:10). Luke adopts the term “paradise” (*paradeisos*) from the Jewish literature of this period; it signifies the realm of eternal bliss in God’s presence where righteous persons go after death.² Jesus finds this criminal worthy of being in God’s presence with all the righteous (including Jesus himself), despite the fact that by the Roman state and by his own admission he had been “justly” considered worthy of condemnation.

What holy and yet outrageous behaviour. Surely this criminal deserves punishment, not paradise?

Granted he did not have as much time, but the second criminal what was needed to receive such abundant mercy from Jesus. He acknowledged his own guilt and Jesus’ innocence and made a sincere request that Jesus remember him, but this does not necessarily represent an obvious plea for forgiveness or a full-scale repentance on his part. Regardless, Jesus uses his power as “King” to dispense mercy in a boundlessly gracious fashion that far exceeds what is asked of him. As the Church Father Ambrose put it, “More abundant is the favour shown than the request made.” It’s worth noting his words to the other criminal (v40) – don’t you fear God – now, this is not about being frightened of God – but having a right and holy respect towards who it is that hangs on the cross – this is life-giving – for this man it was the key to paradise!

Luke’s crucifixion scene shows the wide scope of Jesus’ offer of salvation. Whatever evil or crime one has done is no barrier for acceptance into Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus offers direct access to salvation to persons worthy of the most extreme punishment for their sins. Even those carrying out the crucifixion and the mockeries can be forgiven by Jesus (Luke 23:34a).⁵ The first words of Jesus in today’s Gospel – ‘Father Forgive, for they know not what they do’- isn’t that often true for us? And though he responds to the second criminal’s request, Jesus ignores the calls to save himself, because it is through the cross that he comes into his kingdom, where those deemed unrighteous may share in the salvation of the righteous. His reign is not a death-dealing system intent on punishment, but a “paradise” that “today” extends even to those whom we do not think deserve it – and I’m so glad that’s true.

So what does it mean for Jesus to be our King? – he is the one who can offer us a place in his kingdom, a place in paradise, the one we are called to serve as we live our lives for him, and as the grace of God shows here, offers it no matter what we have done, no matter how good or bad we are – all we have to do is to say, Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom – and he does – his death on the cross, brilliantly summed up by this criminal as the one who did no wrong, yet in being crucified alongside these two shows how God identifies with the brokenness of the world, and gives to us eternal hope – today (yes now!) you will be with me – Jesus Emmanuel – the one who is with us – and for tomorrow – paradise – that place with God forever. So back where we started – imagine paradise – imagine it for this criminal – after a hard, filled life, this man dying next to him promises that what lies after this awful death is a peaceful, beautiful place – a place of rest, a return to Eden – and this criminal realises that this man Jesus

Christ, the King of all in dying as an innocent man on a cross yet the son of God can fulfil what he is offering. And that's where we are too. Guilty as charged, we are offered the same – paradise.

Today is 'stir up Sunday' the day when traditionally Christmas Puddings were stirred – and our special prayer for today, the last Sunday of the Christian year – advent beginning a new one – written 450 years ago – asks God to Stir us up – wake us up to serve King Jesus – and if that's your prayer, I invite you to make it real by giving my Christmas pudding a stir – in recognising King Jesus who died for you, who welcomes you into paradise, when you ask Jesus to remember you, to forgive you, to be your Lord and King. (sing, Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom)