



from the desk of . . .

**Rande Wayne Smith**

D.Min., Th.M., M.Div.

**#750**

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**Palm Sunday**

**A Love That Never Dies - 5**

## **THE KING ON A CROSS**

**Matthew 27:32-44**

The "gospel according to google" tells me that there are currently 29 people in the world who are internationally recognized as heads of sovereign nations & hold the title of King or Queen.

I imagine for most of us, the best known, & the 1<sup>st</sup> one to come to mind would be Queen Elizabeth II (X) whose realm extends over 16 separate nations, provinces, & territories. Now in addition to whatever royal responsibilities the Queen has,

she also has a house or 2 to look after.

1<sup>st</sup> would be Buckingham Palace (X) which is her official London residence from Monday to Friday.

Then there's Windsor Castle (X) her weekend get-away, & where she also spends Easter & Christmas.

She may even be there right now.

She's off to Scotland in July (X) where she stays at the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

And her official residence in Northern Ireland is the Hillsborough Castle. (X)

And in addition to those Elizabeth also has 4 other homes she can sneak off to.

- the Sandringham House (X) her country retreat.
- the Balmoral Castle (X) where she spends August & September. (Which is why Kathy & I were able to tour Buckingham Palace & Windsor Castle when we were in England a year &  $\frac{1}{2}$  ago.)
- the Craigowan Lodge (X) their little 7 bedroom bungalow, & finally,
- the Delnadamph Lodge (X) her hunting cabin.

Now Elizabeth isn't the only Monarch who lives in such style. I could also show you many castles & palaces of the other reigning Kings & Queens.

But this is what we've come to expect of royalty. Our daughter, Jennifer, has a nice home in Cambridge, England ... it's comfortable ... but if she were to put it up for sale today, I'm quite sure that no one from the royal family would be looking at it.

We don't find kings living in apartments or condos or in the house next door. We don't pass kings walking the dog down the street. There's a kind of ritzy, posh, high-class expectation when it comes to a King. The last place we would ever expect to see a King is on a cross.

But that's exactly where we find Jesus on the final day of His earthly life. And Jesus was a King. Pilate asked Him that. "Are you a king?" (John 18:37) And Jesus, acknowledging that He was, quickly added ...

"But my kingdom does not belong to this world." (John 18:36)

This morning we're going to look at Jesus the King,  
& we're going to find Him on the cross.

Listen now to Good News as recorded by Matthew,  
to you who have gathered here for worship at C.C.R.M.  
Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene named Simon, and the soldiers forced him to carry Jesus' cross. They came to a place called Golgotha, which means, "The Place of the Skull." There they offered Jesus wine mixed with a bitter substance; but after tasting it, he would not drink it.

They crucified him and then divided his clothes among them by throwing dice. After that they sat there and watched him. Above his head they put the written notice of the accusation against him: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then they crucified two bandits with Jesus, one on his right and the other on his left.

People passing by shook their heads and hurled insults at Jesus: "You were going to tear down the Temple and build it back up in three days!"

Save yourself if you are God's Son! Come on down from the cross!"

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and the elders made fun of him: "He saved others, but he cannot save himself! Isn't he the king of Israel? If he will come down off the cross now, we will believe in him! He trusts in God and claims to be God's Son. Well, then, let us see if God wants to save him now!"

Even the bandits who had been crucified with him insulted him in the same way. (Matthew 27:32-44)

**May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen**

Where do we find kings? ... We find them in palaces & castles. That's where King Herod was when Jesus was brought before him. (Luke 23:7)

He was living in the lap of luxury.

But here in our Gospel lesson we find the King of kings, the ruler of the universe, occupying the lowest possible place that humanity, in our brutal wickedness, has ever devised. Jesus is hanging on a cross of rough wood, beaten, bleeding, mocked ... & left to die.

The cross was so horrible, so offensive to the Romans that they refused to allow their own citizens to be crucified ... no matter what they had done.

The Roman Philosopher, Cicero (X) called crucifixion "a most cruel & disgusting punishment." He said, "It is a crime to put a Roman citizen in chains, it is an enormity to flog one, sheer murder to slay one; what, then, shall I say of crucifixion? It is impossible to find the word for such an abomination. Let the very mention of the cross be far removed not only from a Roman citizen's body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears."

And, if the mention of the cross was offensive to the Romans, it was even more repulsive to the Jews ... for they looked at it in the light of the O.T.

"If someone has been put to death for a crime & the body is hung on a post, it is not to remain there overnight. It must be buried the same day, because a dead body hanging on a post brings God's curse on the land." (Deuteronomy 21:22-23)

The Jews understood that to mean that a **crucified** person was **abandoned** by God.

This explains why Jesus was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. The act was so offensive to the Jews that they wouldn't allow it to take place within the sacred precincts of their city.

So here's Jesus ... trying to get this new religion started ... & He goes & gets Himself crucified. That's got to affect His credibility with His followers, right?

We would expect them to be almost apologetic.

But just the opposite happened. Rather than trying to avoid it, those early believers often spoke of Jesus having been hanged on a tree, in specific reference to the critical words in Deuteronomy.

"But by becoming a curse for us Christ has redeemed us from the curse that the Law brings, for the scripture says, 'Anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse.'" (Galatians 3:13)

They grasped the theological implications of what Jesus did ... & as a result, they weren't ashamed of the cross. And you know something ... neither are we.

Like the Apostle Paul, who actually "**boasted**" about the cross, (Galatians 6:14),

we don't attempt to hide the way Jesus **died**.

The biggest symbol in this room is the cross. Many of us wear crosses. I have at least a dozen crosses hanging in my office. The cross out front was on the original city seal of Rolling Meadows!

How did that happen? How did a despised & detestable mode of execution become the symbol of our faith?

Obviously because followers of Jesus recognized that it was by His crucifixion on a cross that Jesus took the **curse** of God for our **sin** on Himself.

Listen again to Paul words ...

"By becoming a curse for us Christ has redeemed us from the curse that the Law brings."

As a result, the cross has gone from being something incredibly **horrible** to become something amazingly **gracious**.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffering & shame;  
And I love that old cross, where the dearest & best  
For a world of lost sinners was slain.  
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down.  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it someday for a crown.

Now none of the *Gospels* describes the actual crucifixion. The details would have been well-known to everyone, so there would be no point in dwelling on its' horrors. But the *Gospels* do describe in general terms what happened.

Matthew begins by telling of a man from the North African town of Cyrene who was drafted by the soldiers to carry Jesus' cross. His name was Simon.

As part of the punishment, a condemned man had to carry his cross all over town, so as many people as possible could see him. The authorities thought this would be a deterrent in case someone else was contemplating the same crime.

By this time Jesus had been up for 30 hours. He'd been terribly whipped ... 39 lashes that would have shredded His back. A crown of thorns would have been jammed on His head. Kings wore comfortable crowns ...

Jesus' caused blood to pour down over His face.

The crossbar that Jesus had to carry, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile, from the Praetorium to Golgotha was about 6' long & weighed about 30 lbs. But He was so weakened by this time He was unable to do it. He staggered, so the soldiers seized the 1<sup>st</sup> able-bodied man they could find, who just happened to be Simon.

Simon is another of these guys in Scripture that I'm totally fascinated with. I feel the same about the Magi. Simon & the Magi are guys who show up & play a significant role in the story about Jesus, but we know so little about them.

Where did they come from? What happened to them?

Mark identifies Simon as "the father of Alexander & Rufus." (Mark 15:21) ... Those are 2 names that we actually come across later in the N.T.

In any event, Alexander & Rufus must have been known to the readers of Mark's Gospel or he would have had no reason to mention them.

Bible scholar, William Barclay considers this to be one of the great "hidden romances" of the N.T.  
And I feel that way too.

Simon was a Jew who, like all Jews, would have hated the Romans. So, to have Roman soldiers force him to carry the cross of a fellow Jew so that the guy could be crucified must have been a bitter experience for him.

But I'd like to believe that something un-expectantly incredible happened to Simon that day.

I can't imagine that when they got to Golgotha, Simon merely flung the cross to the ground & took off. I suspect that carrying Jesus' cross had to have made a deep impression on him. So he would have remained there at the cross ... at which point witnessed Jesus' dying responses. And through that, came to faith.

After the Passover, Simon returned to Cyrene & told his family, (his sons Alexander & Rufus), about Jesus.

Years later we're told that believers from Cyrene went to Antioch "to proclaim the Good News about the Lord Jesus" (The Acts 11:20) & start a Church there. Was Simon one of those believers? Were his sons with him?

At another point we're told about a riot in Ephesus. Paul had been preaching & people were coming to faith, which upset those whose livelihood came from making statues of the goddess Artemis. And so a furious mob sets out after Paul ... & at that moment a Jew comes to his defense ... a man named Alexander. (The Acts 19:33)

And then when Paul sends greetings to the believers in Rome, 2 of the people he addresses are "Rufus, that outstanding worker in the Lord's service, & his mother."

(Romans 16:13)

Are we talking about the sons of Simon, who carried Jesus' cross? We don't know. Alexander & Rufus were common names. But stranger things have happened. I like to believe that God did a remarkable thing as a result of this apparently chance encounter between Simon & Jesus on the road to Calvary.

And it snowballed throughout the early Church.

Okay, what happened at the cross? Matthew reports 6 specific things,

& they're all tied to O.T. prophecies.

1<sup>st</sup>, he tells us that Jesus was offered ...

"wine mixed with a bitter substance."

Actually Jesus was offered wine a couple of times during the hours He hung on the cross.

Matthew is referring to the initial attempt.

Before Jesus was nailed to the cross the soldiers wanted Him to drink some wine in order to deaden the pain that was about to take place with the pounding of the spikes into His flesh.

Matthew writes that Jesus refused, presumably so He could experience the **fullness** of His **suffering** & retain a clear mind to the end.

Hours later, John tells us in his Gospel ...  
 "Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed;  
 & in order to make the scripture come true,  
 said, 'I am thirsty.'"

At which time soldiers soaked a sponge with wine & lifted it on a hyssop stock to His lips, & Jesus drank it.  
 (John 19:28-30)

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing Matthew records is that the soldiers ...  
 "divided his clothes among them by throwing dice."  
 What we're talking about here is a "robe, which was made of one piece of woven cloth without any seams in it." (John 19:23) That the soldiers would do this is simply adding insult to injury. Poor Jesus.

3<sup>rd</sup> ... "above his head they put the written notice of the accusation against him." This was the regular practice so that people walking by would know the crime for which the person was being punished ... "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." John adds that it was  
 "written in Hebrew, Latin, & Greek." (John 19:20)

4<sup>thly</sup>, then ... "they crucified 2 bandits with Jesus." Matthew & Mark identify them as "bandits." Luke uses the term (κακούργους) "criminal." Actually, the word refers to what we would call a guerrilla soldier or revolutionary, which is probably more accurate.

Simply being a bandit wouldn't call for crucifixion.

Most likely these 2 guys were Barabbas' associates.  
(Barabbas was released so Jesus could be crucified.)

(Matthew 27:20)

Was Barabbas intended for the cross in the center? Probably. If so, Jesus literally took his place, just as in a figurative sense He takes the place of all who believe on Him & trust Him alone for their salvation. (1 Peter 2:24)

Luke explains that both criminals cursed Jesus along with everyone else, but one of them eventually settled down & rebuked his comrade ... "Don't you fear God? You received the same sentence he did. Ours, however, is only right, because we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong."

Then, turning to the Lord, he pled ...

"Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King!"

"Jesus said to him, 'I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me.'" (Luke 23:40-43)

What a wonderful promise! Someone has written ...

"One thief was saved so that no one might despair,  
but only one so that no one might presume."

5<sup>th</sup> ... the "people passing by shook their heads & hurled insults at Jesus." Basically this fulfils a prophecy made about 1,000 years earlier.

"All who see me make fun of me;  
they stick out their tongues & shake their heads."

(The Psalms 22:7)

To be honest, I've never understood this mindset of making fun of someone ... & especially when they're suffering. It's obviously connected in some way to the bullying issues that are facing us today. But imagine hurling insults at Jesus. ...

I don't even know what to say about that. ...

6<sup>th</sup> ... "in the same way the chief priests & teachers of the Law & the elders made fun of him." These 3 groups make up the religious ruling body of the Jews ... called the Sanhedrin.

Not only did they illegally convict Jesus ... they had to actually go out & mock Him while He was hanging on a cross. I'm trying to imagine these guys preaching & teaching people how to live God pleasing lives. ...

But once again, unwittingly they were fulfilling the taunt found in the Psalms ...

"You relied on the LORD," they say.

"Why doesn't he save you?"

If the LORD likes you, why doesn't he help you?"

(The Psalms 22:8)

So, there we have Matthew's account of what took place at Jesus' crucifixion. And this is where we have to stop & ponder it over in our mind.

Jesus suffered & died for us. Can we imagine it? We're talking about the Creator & His creatures.

Why would He allow us to do that to Him?

I suspect that we're so conditioned at looking at artists renditions of Jesus on the cross that we miss the true horror of it. As far as paintings & pictures go ... they're all too clean, too sterile.

I've read physician's accounts of what takes place during a crucifixion ... but it was Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion," that really brought it home to me.

The crucifixion was bloody & vulgar, ugly & repulsive. Jesus' body was so marred that He was hardly recognizable ... even to His friends. He was tortured ... in the true understanding of that term.

As we try to make sense of this, we begin to recognize something of the horror of our sin ... & of the grace, love, mercy, & compassion of our God.

So here's the main point of this message ... Do you understand that it was for you, & me, that Jesus endured this? Jesus suffered the agonies of the cross, taking our punishment, so that we don't have to.

(Romans 3:25-26)

The **cross** was God's **punishment** for our sins, & when Jesus cried out ... "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" ... it was for us that His eternally ancient bond with the Father was broken. (John 1:2)

We find this theme again & again & again in Scripture.

"Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin & live for righteousness. It is by his wounds that you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

"Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

"Christ was offered in sacrifice once to take away the sins of many." (Hebrews 9:28)

And of course there's that powerful passage from Isaiah

"Because of our sins he was wounded,  
beaten because of the evil we did.  
We are healed by the punishment he suffered,  
made whole by the blows he received.  
All of us were like sheep that were lost,  
each of us going his own way.  
But the LORD made the punishment fall on him,  
the punishment all of us deserved." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Each of the Gospels tell about Jesus' crucifixion, of course, along with the resurrection.

But each also contains its' own special emphasis, & the mocking of Jesus seems to be the dominant theme in Matthew.

Today's passage amounts to 13 verses, with 5 of them dealing with the taunts of those passing by & of the leaders, concluding with ... "even the bandits who had been crucified with him insulted him in the same way."

The interesting thing about these insults is that they centered on Jesus' claim to tear down the Temple & rebuild it in 3 days. This was the only accusation raised at His trial that the witnesses could finally agree on.

(Matthew 26:61)

Jesus did say it, (John 2:19), & people did remember it ...

"You were going to tear down the Temple & build it back up in 3 days! Save yourself if you are God's Son!

Come on down from the cross!"

Jesus was ridiculed for His words ... but it was by His death that He was destroying the Temple of His body, (1 Corinthians 6:19),

& it was by His resurrection that He would raise it again.

(John 2:21-22)

"He saved others, but he cannot save himself!  
Isn't he the king of Israel? If he will come down off  
the cross now, we will believe in him!

He trusts in God & claims to be God's Son.

Well, then, let us see if God wants to save him now!"

Ironically, they were voicing the same thing that the Devil said in 2 of his temptations of Jesus back at the beginning of His ministry. "If you are God's Son,

order these stones to turn into bread." (Matthew 4:3)

"If you are God's Son, throw yourself down." (Matthew 4:6)

In other words ... "If you're God's Son, prove it!"

Theologian D.A. Carson (X) sums it up as well as anyone.

"They thought they were so clever, but the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. Precisely by voluntarily going to the cross, Jesus was destroying 'this temple' - the temple of his body - & in 3 days it would be 'rebuilt.' And precisely because he was the Son of God, he would not come down from the cross! Similar double irony extended to all the mockery he endured. 'He saved others ... but he can't save himself!' they taunted. At one level, they were questioning the legitimacy & reality of his claims. Surely the real Messiah would not be forced to bear such shame & suffering. But at a deeper level, the taunt was largely right. If the Lord Jesus was to save others, he had to sacrifice himself, & he could not save himself."

We would never have thought up a Gospel like this ... but this is true Christianity. Jesus took our punishment on the cross so that we, who believe in Him, could be saved. (John 3:16) Thanks be to God!

**MARANA THA**