

When people think of kings and kingdoms, they think of thrones. Which are not ordinary chairs. They're majestic, elevated, ornate seats that announce power before the king even speaks. History is filled with such thrones.

The Mughal emperors of India sat upon the Peacock Throne: solid gold, inlaid with rubies and pearls and emeralds, its arching canopy shining like the wings of a jeweled bird. The Chrysanthemum Throne of Japan sits on an elevated platform, separated from the commoners by velvet curtains of black and scarlet and surrounded by gold symbols of the shinto religion. Even the centuries old Throne of St. Edward in Westminster Abbey is treated with almost sacramental reverence, the place where monarch after monarch of Great Britain have been crowned.

Everyone knows a throne when they see it. A throne speaks without words. It declares who is in charge, who gives the law, who judges, who rules. And because we know what thrones look like, perhaps Christ the King Sunday surprises us. Because the One we call King doesn't sit on a throne like we expect. He doesn't sit on ivory, gold, or velvet. He doesn't sit under banners surrounded by pomp and ceremony.

Instead, the throne of Christ is made of wood. Rough, splintered, blood-stained wood. His crown is a crown of thorns. His royal procession is not a parade but the long walk to Golgotha. His throne room is not a palace but a hill of execution: the place of the skull. His attendants are not royal guards but criminals hanging on either side of Him. And His first royal decree is not a law but a word of mercy: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

This is the foolishness of the cross. Christ the King reigns not by demanding to be served, but by giving His life as a ransom for many. He rules not by displaying power, but by bearing our sin. He conquers not by killing, but by dying. His throne is a cross, and from that cross He establishes His Kingdom.

Luke tells us that as Jesus walked to His throne, a great multitude followed Him, including women who were mourning and lamenting. He speaks to them as a king. Not a defeated king, but a king delivering a solemn warning, a king still governing the events around Him. He isn't dragged helplessly to His death. He's going exactly where He intends to go. He's ascending to the place where He will accomplish His greatest work. The cross isn't a mistake. The cross isn't an interruption. The cross is His coronation.

And when they crucify him, Jesus doesn't cry out for justice or vengeance. Instead, He offers mercy: "Father, forgive them." A king's words carry authority. When a king declares a pardon, it is done. When He issues a decree, it stands. Here the King of kings uses His authority to speak forgiveness into a world that doesn't understand it and doesn't deserve it. But which desperately needs it.

As Paul proclaims in Colossians, *"In Him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins... peace by the blood of his cross."* The King reigns by taking the punishment His subjects deserve. He reigns by bearing in His own body the full weight of our guilt. He reigns by standing in our place under the judgment of God. No earthly monarch has ever ruled like this. No earthly leader ever could.

But the world doesn't understand this kind of kingship. The Jewish leaders mock Him: *"He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!"* The soldiers mock Him: *"If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"* Even one of the criminals mocks Him: *"Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"*

Notice the theme. Save Yourself. Prove Your kingship. Display Your power. But if Jesus saves Himself, then He can't save anyone else. If He comes down from the cross, then we would still be in our sins. If He refuses the cup the Father has given Him, then the Kingdom of God collapses before it even begins.

He reigns precisely by staying on the cross. He rules precisely by refusing to save Himself. It's so tragically ironic. The very things they mock Him for are the things that reveal His true glory.

Malachi speaks of people who complain that serving God is useless. *"It is vain to serve God,"* they say. *"What profit have we in keeping His commands?"* They see the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, and they conclude that God must not be paying attention. But the Lord promises that He sees, He remembers, He discerns between the righteous and the wicked.

On the cross, where wicked men seem to triumph and the righteous One suffers, God is establishing that very distinction. He is showing that His justice is deeper than appearances. He is showing that His kingdom is not of this world.

And then something remarkable happens. One of the criminals crucified with Jesus joins in the mockery, but the other criminal rebukes him. He confesses his guilt. He acknowledges Jesus' innocence. And then he speaks a prayer that shows astonishing faith: *"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."*

How did this criminal know that Jesus had a kingdom? How could a man gasping for breath as he hangs from a cross possibly be a king? How could this execution be anything other than defeat?

But somehow, somehow, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the thief sees what others cannot. He sees an innocent man suffering an unjust death. He sees his own sin placed on Jesus' shoulders. He sees a king coming into his kingdom. And so he prays. He asks for nothing but remembrance. He asks to be noticed by the King.

And Jesus answers with another royal decree: *"Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise."* From His throne of wood, with the world mocking Him, with His life slipping away, Jesus gives away paradise like a king distributing gifts at His coronation. And the first citizen of the redeemed kingdom is a convicted criminal who trusts the crucified King.

Some use this passage to argue that baptism must not matter much since the thief wasn't baptized. But this moment isn't an argument against baptism at all. Quite the opposite: it's a picture of exactly what baptism truly is. In baptism, the Church carries a person, often an infant, before the King and prays the same prayer the thief prayed: "Lord Jesus, remember this child in Your kingdom."

And Christ the King gives His royal decree in baptismal water and Word: "You are Mine. No matter what happens, you will be with Me. I will not forget you. I will not lose you. You belong to My kingdom." What Jesus said to the thief in that moment is precisely what He says to every baptized believer: "You will be with Me in paradise. Nothing will separate you from my love."

When we gather for worship, when we gather around His Word, when we kneel before His altar, we come into the presence of the crucified King. We come to receive what He won for us on His throne of wood. Here He speaks forgiveness. Here He gives His own body and blood. Here He rules His Church through grace and truth. Here He exercises His royal authority by pardoning sinners, restoring the broken, and calling the dead to life.

The world still mocks this. The world still says, "Save yourself. Prove your power. Show us glory." But the King shows His glory by saving us, not Himself. By suffering for us, not demanding from us. By laying down His life, not preserving it.

Earthly kings demand sacrifice from their subjects. Christ the King becomes the sacrifice for His subjects. Earthly thrones shine with gold and jewels. Christ's throne shines with mercy. His crown is thorns. His royal robe is soaked in blood. His scepter is a nail-pierced hand extended in forgiveness. His victory is resurrection. His kingdom is eternal.

And so today we celebrate a King unlike any other. A King who reigns from a cross. A King that looks like a lamb that was slain. A King whose power is love. A King who remembers you. A King who promises paradise. A King who still speaks from His throne: "Father, forgive them." A King who dies for you. Amen.