

*33When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." 39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

A long, long time ago, when tribes known as Israel were led by women and men known as judges – people whom God inspired in times of crisis to organize the people for battle – a man named Samuel was leading the people as the Lord directed him. When he was old he made his sons judges over Israel but they took bribes and perverted justice. So the people of Israel came to Samuel and asked for a king to govern them, like the other nations. This is what Samuel told the people:

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to be his commanders and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers. He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and

you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel.

So it was that the people of Israel came to have kings rule over them.

First, a man named Saul was chosen by the Lord to rule as king. When he was killed in battle the man who had once been a shepherd boy, David, united the tribes of Israel. Under his rule and the rule of his son Solomon the kingdom of Israel conquered neighboring peoples and grew to its largest extent. But with Solomon’s death the nation that had been united was divided – ten of the tribes forming the northern kingdom that was known as Israel and two of the tribes – Judah and Benjamin – forming the southern kingdom, Judah. Over time both kingdoms fell to foreign empires and the people descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived by the promise of a king of David’s line. They dreamed of a return to the days of glory but century after century those days did not come. Many times there were hopes of the promised king – each time those hopes were disappointed.

When Jesus began to teach and heal the hopes of the people were rekindled. Maybe he was the one. As Jesus came to Jerusalem he organized a parade – he rode on a donkey into town. The prophet Zechariah had promised that this is how the long-promised king would arrive. But soon Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death. The hopes that he was the king, the Messiah (a word meaning anointed one for anointing is how kings were made kings) the Greek word for anointed one is Christ – these hopes were dashed – lost.

And so with Jesus on the cross the mockery was everywhere. Stripped, naked a sign was placed over his head, This is the king of the Jews. The leaders of the people mocked him, He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one! And the soldiers added their voices, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” Even one of the criminals crucified beside him joined in, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself and us!”

Save yourself. That is what a king does – everything for himself. Samuel knew it right from the beginning. Even the great kings ruled for their own glory. The people served them. Like our politicians so often making

decisions based on their own political future – seeking not what is good but what will get them elected one more time and one time after that.

Save yourself. Someone has said we get exactly the leaders we deserve – that they are a reflection of us. Selfish people get selfish rulers. Of course they expected the king to save himself – it is what they would have done.

But one did not join in the mocking. The second criminal crucified there turned to the mocking one and rebuked him saying, “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 his man has done nothing wrong.”

Do you not fear God? He knew there was a higher court, a greater judge than these Roman officers and soldiers. His death was certain —as certain as yours and mine – what would God think about the life he had led?

When a politician or a pastor or a mother or a father fears God then life is about more than saving ourselves. When a teacher or an engineer or a business man or a waitress fears God self may not be placed on the throne of our worship. One criminal feared God that day – “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“Today you will be with me in paradise,” was Jesus’ reply.

Jesus would not save himself, live for himself but for a criminal crucified beside him that day - and for you. And he would not plead for himself but for forgiveness for those who crucified him - and forgiveness for you.

Jesus is a different sort of king altogether – a king who does not seek to be served by his people but gives himself for his people. Will you entrust yourself to Jesus?

Will you follow him? He said once that a cross waits for those who follow him. Not a life of saving self but of giving self. Will you follow your king?