

## **Wisdom Has a Friend on the Cross**

**Text: John 19:16b–27**

We come at last to the cross. Pilate hands Jesus over to the soldiers. They put the beam across Jesus' shoulders and drive him outside the city to Golgotha. It's nine in the morning. There are two others to be executed with him, one on either side.

In the midst of all the affliction and suffering of crucifixion, the Holy Spirit with this reading wants our attention on three things: Pilate's inscription, the soldiers' gambling for Jesus' clothes, and Jesus' care for Mary. We'll consider each of these—how they give us wisdom and courage, how these three scenes of the cross strengthen our faith in Christ's kindness for us.

### **First, the inscription of Pilate.**

Crucifixion was a cruel punishment. Its brutality was a deterrent to crime. This is why criminals were crucified along the road on the way into a city, and why their crimes were written on a placard above their heads. Above the head of Jesus, Pilate wrote, in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*” (v 19). This caused some controversy.

The Jews wanted to edit the sign, ***“This man said, I am King of the Jews.”***

***But Pilate responded, “What I have written I have written”*** (vs 21–22).

This, by the way, is where the INRI, often seen on a cross or crucifix, comes from, Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews. (What in English would be *J*’s in Latin are *I*’s.)

It’s difficult to determine what Pilate was up to. Did he really believe that Jesus was a true king? Probably not, since he condemned him to death. Was Pilate crafting a warning to anyone else interested in starting a spiritual rebellion? Maybe. Was he mocking the Jewish people, sticking his thumb in the eye of the chief priests? “This is what a Jewish king looks like.” Probably. But just like Caiaphas, who unknowingly uttered truth when he said it is ***“expedient that one man should die for the people”*** (18:14), so the Holy Spirit here uses Pilate to preach the truth.

Jesus is the King of the Jews, and more: the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is wisdom—to know that this mockery is true, this inscription stands, Jesus is King. His cross is his throne. He is lifted up and draws all people to himself. The crucifixion is a coronation.

This is so because Jesus, by his suffering and death, overthrows all the tyrants that stand against his kingdom of life and salvation. Jesus faces his enemies, your enemies, on the cross, and he overcomes them. The world, the sinful flesh, and the devil and all demons are undone. The kingdom of darkness is toppled. Sin and death no longer rule, but rather forgiveness, life, and salvation. The cross is a throne because the cross is also the battlefield, where Jesus has the victory.

### **Behold Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.**

The second scene to which the Holy Spirit directs our attention is the gambling for Jesus' clothes. John, who seems particularly interested in all the prophecy being fulfilled in the crucifixion, tells us how the soldiers divided most of the clothing, but the tunic was seamless, so for this *“they cast lots”* (v 24). This prophecy comes from Psalm 22, that profound prophecy of Jesus' suffering, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* It's not just the first verse. The entire psalm belongs to Jesus and his suffering on the cross. He is surrounded by enemies, mocked, derided, and ashamed. His tongue clings to the roof of his mouth. His strength is dried up like a potsherd.

His hands and feet are pierced. You can count his bones. And they gamble for his clothes.

This reminds us that Jesus hung on the cross naked, or very close to it. The shame of Eden, when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and realized they were naked, now belongs to Jesus. There was no shame in nakedness before sin, but now, sinful as we are, we try to avoid even hearing this detail of Jesus' suffering. There are no fig leaves. He is the sacrifice that covers our sins.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus ***“endured the cross, despising the shame”*** (Hebrews 12:2). He did not want the shame, the humiliating mockery of crucifixion, but he did want you, whatever the cost. We are the joy set before him. While the soldiers put their greedy eyes on the seamless tunic, he has his eyes on your salvation.

Third, even from the cross Jesus cares for his family, especially his mother. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there at the foot of the cross with her sister (also named Mary) and Mary Magdalene. The apostle John is there too. First he ran away, but now he ventures to come near. From the cross, Jesus looks down to see John and Mary, and he gives them to each other. ***“Woman, behold, your son! . . . Behold, your mother!”*** (vs 26–27).

What love! If there was a time when we could excuse a little self-pity, crucifixion would be that time. But even as Jesus is hanging from the cross, his thoughts are not for himself but for those he loves. He will not leave Mary without a son but gives John to care for her.

Even while he passively suffers, he actively keeps the Law. He fulfils the Fourth Commandment. On the cross and in his suffering, Jesus honors his heavenly Father and his earthly mother. He is faithful and loving to the end.

All this, for you and me. Jesus is not on the cross for himself. For us men, and for our salvation, he hands himself over to Pilate, to the soldiers, to the shame, to the cross. When we *“survey the wondrous cross On which the Prince of Glory died”* (LSB 425:1), as we read the inscription, *“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,”* as we see the soldiers gambling for his tunic, and as we see John embrace the weeping Mary, we remember and rejoice that this Jesus is our Jesus, our Savior, our brother, and our friend.

Amen