"The Reed Kingdom" -- Matthew 27:24-31

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2 Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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I. In the Praetorium

If you leave out a lot of the details, the meeting sounds so fitting. Jesus stands amidst a synagogue -a gathering-of men. They place a crown upon His head and a scepter in His hand. They bow before Him. They cry out "Hail!-Rejoice!! The King of the Jews!" It sounds almost like a worship service in eternity, with men giving fitting praise to their Lord.

But this is far from it. This is not just not a worship service; this is most hideous anti-worship. This is not a service of reverence, but an exercise in torture and scorn. The Lord wears a crown, but it is a crown of thorns. He holds a scepter in His hand, but it is a reed, a stick. The crown and reed are not symbols of respect; both are instruments of suffering used to wound Jesus all the more. The shouts of worship are hateful, not reverent; there is no rejoicing, only the sneer of cruel sadism. These soldiers do not for one moment believe that Jesus is king of anything. In fact, they beat Him now to prove to all that He is no king at all.

They do not want to hear Jesus speak His Word; they want to silence Him forever. They do not want to receive Jesus' body and blood; they want to shed and destroy it. They do not come to reverence the Son of God; they come to trample Him underfoot.

This is a terrible scene as we see Jesus in the Praetorium. Were we to go into detail of the suffering that Jesus endured there, we would be physically sickened before we were through. So as we ponder this part of the Lord's Passion this evening, let us set our focus upon two elements in the text-the crown of thorns and the reed scepter forced upon our Lord as He suffered at the hands of the Roman guard.

Jesus suffers in the Praetorium because of Pilate's twisted logic and god of self-preservation. Pilate does not want to crucify Jesus, for Pilate himself declares that the Lord is innocent! However, he cannot simply let Jesus go free, or the riots that ensue will cost him his crown, if not his life. Therefore, in his wretched self-service, he declares that Jesus-for His innocence!-must be scourged and beaten by the Roman guard. Why? To show the people that He is no threat, to prove to them that He is no king. If Pilate can make Jesus a most pitiable and pathetic figure, he might be able to let Him go.

The task of the soldiers, then, is to demonstrate that Jesus is no king, so they add mockery to the torture they inflict. They plait a crown of thorns and jam it upon His head; real kings wear laurels or gold of honor, but this poor Man wears spikes of pain. They place a reed into His hand for a scepter; it is given, then contemptuously snatched away and used to beat Him on the head, driving the thorns deeper. This wouldn't happen to a real king; a real king would never allow his scepter to be removed from his hand and then be beaten with it. Clearly, the soldiers demonstrate, this Jesus is no great

sovereign, for He obviously has no power or authority. His kingdom is no better than the stick-scepter used to beat Him. He is the "reed king" and His is the reed kingdom, one with no power or wealth or glory at all.

Of course, we know better, for the Scriptures tell us so. That most-pitiable, helpless Victim is not a king, but far more: He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. But this King is going about the work of redemption; He is saving His subjects from death by His own death, and so He silently endures the punishment. Thus He accepts the crown of thorns, thus He holds the reed scepter in His hand.

Dear people of God, when you gaze upon the crown of thorns, marvel at its significance. When Adam and Eve fell, God cursed the ground because of sin; for the rest of time would Adam's toil in the fields be great, for now the ground would produce thistles and thorns (Gen. 3:18). But Jesus has come to stand in our place, to die for our sin. Therefore, the Lord accepts the crown of thorns and bears it upon His head because He bears the curse of sin upon Himself. Christ the King wears thorns because He takes the curse of sin to the cross and destroys it.

Therefore, dear Christians, take to heart that crown of thorns, for it teaches you that your sin has been borne to the cross by your King and Savior, Jesus. He has donned your crown of shame, and He has destroyed it by His suffering and death.

Gaze upon that reed-scepter as well, and give thanks that the Creator of heaven and earth accepts the beating of that reed. He allows Himself to be beaten because He has come to save. He allows Himself to be bruised and broken with that reed because He has not come to break bruised reeds, but to justify sinners.

In His work of justification, He doesn't look like much of a king. It's because, in this sinful world, our vision is distorted and things do not always appear as they are. Death and suffering seem so powerful and frightening, as if the grave is the ultimate ruler. On the other hand, Jesus looks so weak and helpless: His crown is made of thorns, His guerdon (INRI) looks like a criminal accusation, and His throne is a roughhewn cross.

No, the Savior doesn't look much like the King, not if we are looking at Him with our sinful-human eyes. But by faith we know what Scripture declares: The King died for our sins, and now He lives again for eternity. And the King, Jesus Christ, will return in glory. There will be no marred vision then-all will see Him for who He is, and everyone will bow the knee confess that Jesus is Lord.

This is our faith, our comfort and our hope. The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes (Ps. 118:22-23). Keeping our eyes on the cross, we earnestly look forward to that time when our King returns in glory. He who died that shameful death, in seeming poverty and powerlessness, will return in glory to raise us unto eternal life. This hope is of great comfort to us in the present day; for, in the meantime, we live in the reed kingdom.

II. The Reed Kingdom

We live in the reed kingdom because the treasures and privileges of the realm look no better than that old reed-scepter held by the Lord. In this world, the things of God seem shabby and useless, worth no more than an old stick and hardly precious enough to waste one's time on, much less put

trust in. Being a Christian appears hardly advantageous, for the Christian must still endure suffering and battle temptation throughout life; therefore, Jesus' victory over sin and death is hardly apparent. As far as the Lord's work, He does promise to be present with His people: Yet when the world looks at the means of His presence, it does not see Christ there. It only hears words. It only sees a font full of water, some bread and wine. It is a kingdom like the reed-scepter and the suffering Lord; there is no power to be seen.

But do not be dismayed. Remember that our vision is distorted in this world by sin, that godly treasures of true value often appear worthless to the eye. The Lord enthroned on the cross seemed weak and helpless, but by His death He destroyed death. His means of grace look like mere symbols and quaint rituals, yet by these means He gives us forgiveness, life and salvation. Furthermore, the Christian indeed must endure trials in this life; but take heart, for the Lord declares, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The Law of your afflictions declares to you your need for a Savior; that Savior is Christ the King, who has been afflicted for you.

Therefore, dear hearers in Christ, dear subjects of a reed kingdom, ponder your King, be warned and be comforted.

Be warned: Expect no worldly advantage to being a child of God. Have no anticipation of material gain, enjoyable success or security. Have nothing to do with the teaching that Jesus came so that you might have a happy and prosperous life in this world. All such thoughts are scourged in the Praetorium, and all such ideas die at the cross.

Furthermore, flee the temptation to expect that God will work in ways that appear glorious to the human eye. Do not seek out visions or miracles, and do not search out the Lord within you or your emotions. All such efforts fail, for the Lord has not promised that to be found there. Rather, seek the Lord where He may be found: In His Word, in His Sacraments. That is where He promises to forgive you, strengthen your faith and grant you life. These means of grace may not appear glorious to our sight, but they are marvelous to the eyes of faith.

Many a man has shipwrecked his faith because he expected material prosperity as a result, or because he sought to find Jesus in things that appeared glorious, looking everywhere but in the Lord's Word and Sacraments. But you, dear people, are members of the reed kingdom; your King did not suffer in the Praetorium so that you might enjoy some temporal blessings temporarily. Be warned.

Be warned, but be comforted, too. Your King did die on the cross so that you could enjoy the Kingdom of heaven for eternity. The reed kingdom looks absurd and worthless now, but our vision will be cleared on the last day. St. John gives us a glimpse of clarity in the epistle for this night, as he describes the New Jerusalem. It is a city of glory, of light and of precious stones. It is a city where even the reed used to measure it is not a mere wooden yardstick, but a rod of gold. There is no need for sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates it. The Lamb is its light.

Not only that, but the New Jerusalem is called the bride of Christ. Therefore, dear Christians, this is not your destination; it is you, the Church. The world sees sees a ragtag band of people following a King who is stricken with His own reed-scepter and helplessly crowned with thorns. But truly the reed is gold, you are precious before God, and your King is the risen Christ who wears a crown not

of thorns, but of gold (Rev. 14:14). We do not see this with our eyes now; like foreigners in a faraway land, we wait to see the kingdom of which we are already citizens even now. We wait, and Christ our King waits with us, present in His means of grace until He comes again in glory.

Therefore, dear Christians, be comforted this night. The crown of thorns has been worn for you, that the curse of sin might be done away with. The Lord has been beaten with the reed, suffered and died in your stead. But His kingdom is no reed kingdom lacking any value or worth. His Kingdom lasts forever, and you are His people.

O Lord Jesus Christ, You who in an innocent manner were accused as an evil-doer for the sake of our sins, let Your holy suffering redound to the good of us poor evil-doers. You King of Truth, make us partakers of Your Kingdom, guide us into all Truth, and transfer us from the gracious Kingdom of Truth into the Kingdom of eternal glory. Amen (Gerhard, An Explanation of the History of the Suffering and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, p. 161-2)