THE CROSS AND THE CROWN OF OUR KING

1. The cross secures
2. The crown assures

Reader's Digest magazine used to publish a series of "condensed" books. I am not sure if they still do. We have some in our library. These "condensed" books were just what they said they were: within one book 4 or 5 larger novels were condensed - trimmed down to the bare essentials necessary for understanding the whole story. And while the reader may not have gotten all the details, you got enough to see how everything fit together.

This thought comes to mind because both Palm Sunday, which we celebrate today, and this portion of God's Word from the book of Philippians presents us with a sort of condensed version of the entire life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In the events of Palm Sunday as well as this text we find the essentials of the Christian message.

Think of Gospel lesson heard a few moments ago. Jesus rode into Jerusalem and was greeted and treated as he should have been - like a king. The shouting and palm-waving was an indication of the glory and praise that Jesus deserves. This aspect of Palm Sunday might be symbolized with a crown.

But equally telling is how he entered the city - on a donkey, a symbol of lowliness and humility. And as for those shouts, well, we know that the Hosannas of today would do a complete 180 and turn into cries for his crucifixion. This aspect of Palm Sunday foreshadowed the reality of the cross that would come on Good Friday.

On the one hand, the cross. On the other hand, the crown. In text, Paul addresses and condenses these two extremes in the life of Christ. He shows us how the two fit together in both our present and eternal lives as he discusses THE CROSS AND THE CROWN OF OUR KING. And what he says can be further condensed into these two statements: the cross secures and the crown assures.

In the verses right before our text Paul speaks to the Philippian Christians on the topic of Christian humility. He ends his thoughts with this statement: EACH OF YOU SHOULD LOOK NOT ONLY TO YOUR OWN INTERESTS, BUT ALSO TO THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS. Paul then holds before them the ultimate example of selflessness, an example we are to imitate and pray that will continually be developed within us: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

What is the attitude Christ Jesus? At no time does this become more evident than during Holy Week. Think of it this way: when it came to attaining our redemption, he held nothing back for us. The encouragement for us, then, is to hold nothing back for him. Then Paul launches into his beautiful discourse on the cross and crown of Christ: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!

Mark Twain once wrote a book about two English boys. One was named Tom Canty. He was born to a poor family who had neither the means nor the desire to take care of him. The other was named Edward Tudor. When he was born the whole nation celebrated because he would someday become King of England.

Tom and Edward had nothing in common except this: they shared almost identical looks. And the entire story line of Twain's book, entitled The Prince And The Pauper, is how these two boys from two very different worlds ended up exchanging places with each other.
The prince became a poor pauper, and the pauper became a privileged prince.

If we magnify that exchange in the highest possible way, we can still only begin to understand the about-face that Jesus did for us. Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of Lords, became a pauper so we might become princes. In separate and succinct phrases, our text outlines the nature of this great demotion.

Paul begins: *Who, being in very nature God*. In the opening words of the explanation to the second Article we say: *I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, is my Lord*. In the Apostles’ and Nicene Creed which we confess together just about every Sunday, we make equally strong statements about the divinity of Jesus.

The point is simply this. The person riding into Jerusalem with the full expectation that he will not be riding out again is no ordinary person. Jesus is indeed a true man; yet the mystery of the ages is that Jesus is also true God.

But in order to carry out his mission on earth, which is the accomplishment of our eternal salvation. He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. With the exception of his miracles, for the most part of his life on earth Jesus voluntarily put aside his divine power. We refer to this as Jesus' state of humiliation. Jesus became one of us to rescue us from the fate we deserve for breaking God's rules. Compared to what and who he is, he made self nothing is really an understatement.

Think of what Jesus gave up. From the majesty of heaven he moved to ridicule on earth. He exchanged the adoration of angels for the persecution of men. To such a world as this he came and made himself nothing.

The description continues: Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Another strange twist: He who is master of all became servant of all, willingly doing for others. A good example will be this Thursday, when Jesus washes his disciples' feet as an example of humble servant leadership. The only person in the universe who had the legitimate right to assert his authority waves off the privilege to become a servant.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross. To what extent did he humble himself? He became obedient to death as our substitute, because the wages of sin is death. But this was no ordinary death - even death on a cross.

It is not necessary to go into all the details about this kind of execution other than to say that the Roman Empire would not allow its citizens to be crucified, no matter how great their crime might be. In fact, no Roman citizen should even see a cross, much less come to close to one.

Yet Jesus was hung on one. And every Christian knows why. This was the plan to undo our sin. In condensed form, the story goes like this: God says do not disobey me, do not sin; but we do. God says if you do the crime, you do the time. And the time is eternal death in a very real hell. No parole. No bail. No time off for good behavior.

God is just. But God is also love. So to spare us from the punishment we rightfully deserve he came up with an arrangement called Jesus. He lived the perfect life as our substitute and then died on the cross in our place. Because of him and his work, the sentence is reversed. Heaven is ours by holding on to this truth with the hand of faith. In other words, the cross secures our salvation.

How do we know that for sure? That question is answered in the second half of our text where we have some very different language and images. From the cross we move to the crown. What the cross secures, the crown assures: *Therefore God exalted him to the*
highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The wonderful thing about Holy Week is the way it ends. One week from today, Good Friday will be in the past and replaced by Easter Sunday. And with that exchange the pauper once again becomes the prince he rightfully is. On that day Jesus moved from dishonor to honor; from a name that was mocked and ridiculed to a name that is confessed and at which every knee will bow. Christians do this now, but everyone will do it on the Last Day when Christ comes again. And when he comes again, God will be glorified.

Christ's resurrection and resumption of the glory and power and might that is his as King of kings and Lord of Lords - referred to this as Jesus' state of exaltation - proves his humility in our place was sufficient payment for our salvation. What the cross secures, the crown assures. That is the message of our text for today. That means our eternal salvation is both secure and assured. And that is a pretty good place to be.

But there is something else that we can learn from this text and apply to our lives. In a sense, the whole sequence of the cross coming before the crown also describes the general pattern of the Christian life.

Nobody has to tell us that we live in a sinful world. God blesses us and keeps us and allows us enjoyment of life, but there are also enough reminders within our lives to let us know we are not home yet. So we sometimes talk about the crosses we have to bear. In his first epistle, Peter tells us that these things should not surprise us, but that we should rather expect them.

Maybe they come in some physical or emotional form. Maybe they come in the form of pet sins and weaknesses we struggle with - and sometimes lose to. Maybe we find ourselves feeling weary with the ups and downs of life. Or maybe we unwittingly and unintentionally get caught in the crossfire of a world that is moving more and more away from God. I would guess that all of us have things we could do without and would never choose to bring into our lives. But they are there, and we have to deal with them.

And one constructive way of dealing with them suggested by this text is taking the long view and understanding that although our troubles and crosses may bother us, they are temporary. And they certainly do not define us. What defines us is who we are and whose we are and the crown of life that awaits us in heaven.

And that - condensed to its bare essentials - is what this week is all about, isn't it? The cross leads to the crown - for Jesus, and because of Jesus, for us as well.

Another Holy Week is now upon us. Having followed Jesus into Jerusalem today, may God grant us rich spiritual blessings as we continue our journey with him through the intensity of Maundy Thursday to the pain of Good Friday to the ultimate victory of Easter Sunday. Amen!

Pastor Keith J. Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill