

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 17, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 23:38

“And an inscription also was written over Him in letters
of Greek, Latin, and Hebrews THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”
(New King James Version)

THE INSCRIPTION ON THE CROSS

Two thousand years ago, when a criminal was executed, it was customary to write out a brief description of the charge on which the man had been condemned, and nail it to the gallows, so that inquisitive passersby might know what had brought him to his doom.

We know that Jesus was put to death because He made the religious folk of His day uncomfortable. He took the lid off and showed them what they really were, and they hated Him for it. But the formal charge was that He claimed to be the “King of the Jews”; and in a country ground under the heel of Rome, any such claim meant treason, and people are put to death for treason.

Pilate himself chose the wording to be placed over the head of Jesus as He hung on His Cross. I wonder what was in Pilate’s mind!

(1) Was it a cheap sneer at the Carpenter of Nazareth, as if to say, “You poor fool, did You really try to snatch the imperial power from Caesar?” or

(2) Was it a sly joke at the expense of the Jews whom Pilate heartily detested? Was Pilate making fun of them by saying in effect, “This is your ‘King’ the only king poor slaves like you deserve — a king nailed to a cross!”

The priests read the inscription and saw the veiled and subtle insult, and, smarting under Pilate’s sarcasm, demanded that he take the placard down. But they only got the peevish reply, “What I have written, I have written” (John 19:22).

But the three languages -- why the three languages? No doubt they were used in the first instance to make sure that every one in the crowd would be able to read and understand; for remember, Jerusalem in that Passover week was packed with more than two million visitors from all parts of the world. Latin was the official language of the Roman administration; Greek was the language of international commerce and culture; and Hebrew was the sacred language of the Jewish people themselves. But each of these three languages stood for a dominant idea, for something particular and unique; and each of those languages was at the Cross to proclaim: “This is Jesus, the King!” Let us look a little more closely at each of them in turn.

1. **It was written in GREEK.** Greek was the language of culture. Down the centuries the Greeks had been a people of keen-edged intellect. In that little land on the shores of the Mediterranean had lived poets and writers, sculptors, artists and philosophers whose contribution to art and learning is still, after centuries of imitation, absolutely unrivalled. The Greeks were the people of sheer genius who created the culture of the Western world, and we today are eternally in their debt; for Greece has been the fountainhead of a music, a rhythm, a loveliness which will go singing their way down the centuries as long as there is a sense of beauty in the souls of men. And the language in which all that beauty and intellect and genius were concentrated was Greek. And over the Cross it was written in Greek, "This is Jesus, the King!" In other words, Jesus was claiming the realm of culture for His own -- Jesus is King there!

But is He? There is a type of culture in the world today which very definitely leaves Jesus out. It denies His deity and dethrones His moral standards. There is a culture which is frankly and belligerently irreligious. On many a university and college campus today there is a supercilious, pseudo-scientific attitude that regards religion as something good for old people who have lost their teeth, or for infants who haven't got theirs yet! This attitude scornfully regards religion as quite irrelevant to the stern problems and perplexities that confront mankind in the nuclear age.

Isn't it ironic that we stand, like a lot of mixed-up kids, on the brink of global catastrophe with the awesome power that science has placed in our hands, and the spiritual and, moral resources of the caveman! It is now a commonplace that we have more power than we know how to handle, like children in a nursery playing with loaded revolvers. Arthur Koestler in his brilliant book, The Sleepwalkers, has this significant sentence: "The basic novelty of our age is the combination of this sudden, unique increase in physical power with an equally unprecedented spiritual ebb tide." The really dangerous foe which Christianity is facing today is not the worldwide evangelistic and militant fervor of Islamic fundamentalism, it is rather this worldwide anti-religious culture which acknowledges no god at all. It spreads itself over every department of life.

Much of modern art, philosophy and literature is strangely frustrating and unsatisfying just because it hasn't any sort of background in God. But the background of life is God; and therefore, books which claim to be "realistic" and yet have no inkling of that background are not realistic at all.

Sometimes, indeed, this type of culture does express its views on religion, generally in a rather patronizing way. But Jesus Christ wants no person's patronage -- He wants the surrender of my soul. A well-known Oxford professor who, was also a great Christian, was approached by a young lady one day who said to him, "Doctor, do tell me, what do you think about God?" to which he replied, "That, my dear young lady, is a very unimportant question. The only thing that really matters is what God thinks about me!"

John Owen, the seventeenth century Puritan, was perfectly right when he said that the main barrier between the human soul and Christ is simply pride -- the self-sufficient, superior feeling which will not go down on its knees and cry out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." There are multitudes of people today who, rather than stand thus in Christ's debt, refuse the outstretched

hand of saving grace, and leave Christ out of their lives altogether, thus missing the very best that God can offer.

One of the most dangerous features of this irreligious culture is its tendency to believe that cleverness is superior to goodness. If only a person has a touch of genius, it holds, that more than atones for any defects in his moral standards. For example, Lord Byron, the poet, was beyond doubt a wicked and lustful man. And when challenged, he would brazenly exclaim, "I am not as other men; I am a poet. I am not to be judged according to the standards whereby others are judged." That kind of idea is not only absurd, it is devilishly dangerous; and I'm afraid some of the TV evangelists subscribe, perhaps unconsciously, to that kind of thinking. It is certainly significant that the field of the arts is riddled with homosexuality and lesbianism and other bizarre forms of behavior. Nevertheless, in the realm of culture, Christ claims, and rightly claims to be King.

It boils down to this: Everywhere -- in art, literature, philosophy, politics, industry, economics -- our standard is to be the character of Christ. We must bring all our culture and place it in front of Him and judge it by Him. Before His white scorching purity nothing unclean can survive; and everything that is suggestive and unworthy is shown in its true colors as unutterably mean and degrading.

We do not judge Christ - He judges us.

And He claims His Lordship in the realm of culture. They wrote it on the Cross in Greek - "This is Jesus, the King!"

2. It was written in LATIN. Now Latin was the language of government. Down the centuries the Romans had stood for law and order. They sent their marching legions out to conquer the world. They planted the Roman standards on every shore. Their engineers and slave workers built the great roads which carried their trade and commerce to the farthest limits of their dominions. And everywhere they sent out their civil servants to teach and maintain the rule of law. And the Romans had such a genius for law and government that every system of law today, after the lapse of 2,000 years, looks back to the Roman system as its parent. Latin, therefore, was the language which taught the necessity for just and equitable government.

And it was written on the Cross in Latin: "This is Jesus the King!" In other words, Jesus was claiming the realm of government for His own. Jesus is King there -- King of the nations!

But is He? Does Jesus Christ, our King and Lord, receive His rightful sovereign place in the realm of politics?

Those of you who are older will remember the Nazi salute, and the "Heil Hitler" which accompanied it; and German Christians have often pointed out that that salute was a symbolic rejection of Christ. "We will not have this Man to rule over us! Jesus, keep at arm's length -- keep away! We can govern perfectly well without Your interference." Indeed, as we know, Hitler said to the Church in Germany, "You mind your affairs: comfort the people, baptize the children, marry the young people, bury the dead. But I'm running the country, and don't you

dare to interfere!” Thank God, thousands upon thousands of believers rose up and said, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29); and the Confessing Church of Germany was born, and multitudes of those Christians suffered terribly, and many of them like Dietrich Bonhoffer, sealed their testimony with their blood.

Now God has ordained two institutions to fulfil His purposes in the world: (a) The Church and (b) the State. Jesus Christ is King and Head over both Church and State, and these two institutions are under the continual judgment of God. But today the attitude in many quarters is, “Don’t bring religion into politics.” But that is absurd, because when you think about it, it just means this: Don’t take Christ too seriously.” He’s all right for the stained-glass window, but not for the Congress.

When will it be realized that this exclusion of Jesus from the sphere of secular government, this rigid separation between things secular and things sacred, this compartmentalizing of life which warns Christ, “Thus far and no farther,” is always fatal? It is fatal because at the heart of it there is a radical insincerity, the insincerity which runs life on two gears, and is continually changing over from one to the other; the blindness which will not see that there are not and cannot be two kinds of truth, but that Jesus must be King everywhere, in every sacred and every secular sphere, or else King nowhere at all; that, in short, your only alternatives are either to apply the Gospel to every single one of life’s relationships, or else scrap the Gospel altogether. There is no third alternative.

For generations in this country the Church has been plagued by a false “pietism” which said, “Get your own soul saved. That’s all that matters. This world is only a dirty mud puddle that must be splashed through as soon as possible, to get to the other side. Politics is a dirty business, and Christians shouldn’t get involved with this sinful world.” What a horrible heresy! This is God’s world, not the devil’s; and we should be grateful that within the last fifteen years evangelical Christians have gotten involved increasingly in politics and government, to the dismay of the liberal establishment. But much yet needs to be done. For years the devil took over because Christians defaulted; and the blame for much of the moral chaos we are experiencing now, with secular humanism calling the shots, must be laid at the door of Christians who have allowed satanic forces to prevail for too long.

Remember - they wrote it on the Cross in Latin:

“This is Jesus, the King!”

3. It was written in HEBREW. Now Hebrew was the language of revealed religion. Down the centuries God, in His inscrutable wisdom, had chosen one race, Israel, had revealed Himself to them in all His majesty and holiness, and had commissioned them to be His missionaries to the world. For hundreds of years the prophets of Israel had issued the clarion call, “Thus saith the Lord.” The Jews had such a genius for religion that all the world stands in their debt forever. They were the custodians of the eternal oracles of God. And the language which had to carry all the weight of that revelation was the Hebrew language -- the language of revealed religion. And it was written on the Cross in Hebrew, “This is Jesus, the King!” In other words, Jesus was claiming the realm of religion for His own.

And yet, shame to say, there still arises, even within the ranks of mainline denominations, that old heresy -- it rears its ugly head in every generation -- that most paralyzing and despicable heresy which tells us that one religion is as good as another, that it doesn't really matter what religion a person embraces so long as he is "sincere." Presumably it doesn't matter whether a person mistakenly drinks poison instead of prescribed medicine, so long as he is "sincere" about it! Listen to the ringing affirmation concerning our Lord which sounds forth from the New Testament: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other Name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Let us face it: Jesus Christ is the greatest Dictator the world has ever known. There is "no other Name" that spells "salvation." He will brook no rival. He is final and supreme in His solitary splendor. He is God's last and perfect Word to a lost and dying world.

But is this the place Christ holds in our personal religion? "Christ is the greatest character in history," says a modern essayist. But is that all we can say about Him?

"He was the founder of the finest religion the world has ever known," says another. But is that all we can say about Him?

"He is our great example, mankind's supreme moral teacher, the noblest martyr of all the ages," says yet another.

But have the souls whom Christ redeemed with His blood no surer word than that? Yes indeed, they have!

"Jesus, my Lord, my God, my All,
Hear me, blest Savior, when I call."

Yes -- King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

"My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Can you make that sublime affirmation? Jesus Christ is the infinite God-Man, Who alone can atone for an infinite number of sins committed by an infinite number of people. It is Jesus Who forgives our sin, and only God can forgive sin!

Queen Victoria, who sat on the English throne for 62 years, hoped that she might live until the Second Coming of our Lord, so that she might personally yield up to Him her crown and kingdoms.

Have you handed over to Him the crown and kingdom of your life? Have you made Him Lord and Master of every area of your being? Let us strive to take Him "Jesus, the King" in the realms of culture, government, and personal faith and commitment. For one day, a great multitude of all nations and tongues will exclaim in the perfected language of heaven,

"Lift up your heads, Oh you gates; ...
that the King of Glory may come in!"

(Psalm 24:7).

“Hail to the Chief!” God grant that our voices too may be heard there on that great crowning day!

AMEN.