

+ Luke 23:35-43 + The Promises of End Time: You Will Be with Me in Paradise +
+ Last Sunday of End Time: Christ the King + 24 November 2013 +

When the young senator from Massachusetts was elected President in 1960, millions rejoiced. At the dawn of a new decade, the young senator brought hope and possibility to the White House and to a booming generation whose parents had survived the Great Depression and the Second World War. A nation fell in love with their new president, his wife Jackie, and their children—a family so young, so full of vigor and life, so symbolic of what many hoped for as they entered the 1960s. With such energy in the White House, anything seemed possible. President Kennedy didn't hesitate to keep that dream alive. After all, he had the eloquent ability to make the kind of promises that moved people to try to put a man on the moon or stand up to the Soviets or serve their country.

Oh, in three short years there were plenty of ups and downs—from the manned space program and the Berlin Airlift and the first efforts at integration to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs and increasing involvement in a little country called Vietnam. Yet there was so much hope, so much promise for the future, so many asking, "What could be...?", that the media attached the name of legendary Camelot to the Kennedys.

Wherever Kennedy went, huge crowds gathered just to see him and perhaps even shake his hand. Tens of thousands gathered in Berlin to celebrate his visit. Thousands lined the streets when he visited Dallas, TX in late November 1963. He had important speeches to make with national and global implications. There seemed to be so much hope for the future, but hope came to a screeching halt when three shots rang out in Dealey Plaza on 22 November 1963. "What could be" became "what could've been".

There was a lot of "what could be" when a young rabbi from a backwater town called Nazareth started preaching and teaching and performing miracles. For 400 years, God had been silent sending no prophetic messages to his people, but after the Romans had taken power, a strange messenger named John came baptizing in the Jordan River and preaching a message of repentant preparation for the coming Messiah. When Jesus of Nazareth came to be baptized **"to fulfill all righteousness"** (Matthew 3:15) and extraordinary things happened when he stepped out of the water, people began to notice. John's constant urging **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29) drew even more attention to Jesus.

As Jesus went throughout Judea and Galilee and even Samaria, people started to listen to what he had to say. Word of amazing miracles—demons cast out, illnesses cured, injuries healed, even the dead raised—spread like wildfire. Soon tens turned into hundreds and even thousands who listened to Jesus daily teach the good news of the kingdom of God.

Most assumed he was a prophet, but some even dared to think he was much more than that—the long-promised Messiah. If that was the case, then they had real reason for hope. The Messiah, the Christ was God's Anointed sent to save his people. What they often forgot was that he was sent to save them from their sins and from eternal death in hell rather than their Roman "oppressors", but those who traveled with Jesus felt like anything was possible. There was so much hope, so much expectation, so much possibility in this young rabbi who was doing amazing things.

Yes, in three years of ministry, there were ups and downs. When Jesus fed over 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, the crowds tried to force him into becoming a "bread king". Sometimes Jesus' teaching actually turned people away. Often his love for the unlovable, the detestable, or the unclean turned off people and even made enemies of others, especially when he criticized them for loveless hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Yet huge crowds continued to follow Jesus and wondered, "What could be...?"

When he went to Jerusalem in the spring to celebrate the Jewish high festival of Passover, the people treated Jesus like a king. They laid their cloaks and palm branches on the ground so his donkey would not have to walk on the dirt. They waved palm branches in the air and sang ancient songs of praise reserved for the royal descendants of old King David. **"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!"** (Matthew 21:9) Jesus was their king and there was so much hope, but their hope came to a screeching halt five days later as Jesus stood on trial before the Roman governor, who caved in to the crowd's demands to have Jesus put to death.

After being welcomed into Jerusalem as a king, Jesus stumbled his way out of Jerusalem beneath the burden of a cross and the ridicule of so many against this **"king of the Jews"**. The Roman soldiers with sadistic skill pounded spikes through his hands and feet and propped him up to die a slow, excruciating death between two common thieves.

The crowds that had praised him came out to ridicule him. ***“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”*** Little did they realize they were fulfilling ancient prophecy with their attacking words. The soldiers mocked him as they tried to get him to drink some sour wine to take off the edge. ***“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”*** They had nailed a proclamation to the cross from the Roman governor insulting Jesus and his people—***“This is the king of the Jews.”*** He looked so pathetic, so humiliated, so bloody, that even the criminals on either side of him joined in the fun. ***“Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*** There was nothing glorious or regal about Jesus hanging on that cross. For those who had followed him, “what could be” would soon be “what could’ve been”, but then something strange happened.

This was no ordinary criminal hanging on the cross. This was no ordinary king dying before their eyes. This was no ordinary human being between two criminals. This was the holy God, the King of kings, the Messiah, the Savior of the world—and the Lord in his grace allowed a thief to see that with eyes of faith. He rebuked his fellow criminal and defended Jesus. ***“Don’t you fear God...since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*** Then he said, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** The thief knew who was hanging next to him and when the King opened his mouth, “what could be” became “what will be”. ***“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”***

From an emergency room in Dallas, news of Kennedy’s death shook the world. If you’ve paid any attention in the past week to all the recounting of what happened that November day 50 years ago, you hear the same question asked again and again, “Where were you?” Aging Boomers recall how classes or work or family gatherings stopped and grainy black and white televisions went on, how people young and old across the globe grieved as if they had lost a loved one. The images of the events surrounding Kennedy’s assassination are unforgettable as they mark a watershed moment in history when “what could be” became “what if” for a generation, for a decade, for a nation. Hopes and expectations disappeared with the president’s passing.

What kind of expectations do you have of Christ the King? What do you hope he’ll do for you and accomplish in your life and in the lives of people you know and love? Is it a shallow expectation that hopes Jesus can make you a more purposeful or self-controlled or kinder person? Is it a self-centered hope that Jesus will finally bring a solution to those nagging problems in your family, in your marriage, at work, at school? Is it a short-sighted expectation that Jesus will make your life better or even make your church better?

...But what happens when Jesus doesn’t meet your expectations? Your self-control or kindness only goes so far. Your nagging problems continue to persist. You don’t have any noticeable improvements in your life and your church still struggles. What happens when Jesus doesn’t fulfill your short-sighted, self-centered hopes the way you want? Do you wonder “what if” or think “what could’ve been” and then move on from Jesus to something or someone better? Do you get angry because he failed your expectations?

After all, for someone who should look and act regal, Jesus doesn’t. He’s poor. He’s lowly. He’s a humiliating embarrassment. There’s nothing glorious about him by the world’s standards. He even hangs out with the unlovable, reaches out to the detestable, and dies with the criminal. Why would you or I want someone so unexciting to be our King or would we rather depose him for someone or something more promising?

Now before you do that, take a closer look at that ***“king of the Jews”*** hanging on the cross. Yes, he’s being ridiculed even by those being crucified with him. Yes, few if any mourn for him. Yes, it might even seem ridiculous that he makes a promise of eternal life and heaven to a thief.

...But those aren’t empty words! They’re proof that in Jesus, “what could be” becomes “what will be”. Amidst all that humiliation and blood and suffering and embarrassment, Christ the King proves himself to be your King and mine. He does what no king, no president, no leader could ever do. He keeps that promise sealed with blood and death. ***“You will be with me in paradise!”*** Yes! For that repentant thief, “what could be” became “what will be for eternity.” Yes! For you too there’s a promise guaranteed in blood with a cross and with the death of the almighty and gracious Son of God. You will be in heaven with Jesus too! It’s not you “could” be in heaven maybe, possibly sortakindalike, but ***“you will be with me in paradise.”***

As a forgiven child of God through faith in Jesus, your hope, your expectations start there at the cross with the greatest promise of all guaranteed in the death of the King of kings. Then others follow from there. All the selfless blessings Jesus gives you—his love, peace, joy, and so much more— are blessings you can then share with others. These are not shallow hopes and expectations, but hope as broad and high and wide and

deep and real as the love of Christ is for us. These are not short-sighted hopes, but eternal hope to be fulfilled when Christ brings us to be in his kingdom. They are blood-bought guarantees of life eternal for you and me.

As significant as Jack Kennedy's death was, it never really helped anyone. In fact, we'd probably say it made life more difficult for so many. "What could be" became "what could've been", and so it goes with the death of any human ruler, who even in death can't keep all his promises.

Jesus' death, however, changed your life and mine and changed our world by providing something no one else could give—forgiveness and eternal life. What's just as great is that Jesus, unlike every other ruler, didn't stay dead, but actually conquered death three days later. Now we can be sure that when Christ our King says from the cross, "**You will be with me in paradise**", "what could be" is what will be ours for all eternity. Amen.