

Christ the King

The BBC panel show *'Mock the Week'* always ends with a round in which panellists offer suggestions for unlikely scenarios. Some of the unlikely scenarios covered so far include: *'Unlikely things to hear on a Breakfast Show'*, *'Unlikely things to hear on Crimewatch'* and *'Unlikely things to read on a medical label'*. The contributions can be very funny – which I guess is the intention – and those of you who have watched this show know that I'd be very ill-advised to share any of the answers in church on a Sunday morning! But it did get me thinking. What if the scenario was *'Unlikely people to meet in paradise'*? If you were a panellist on the show, which people might you suggest, and why? These people might be people you know personally or have heard about in the news, or groups of people demonised in society.

Our passage from Luke's gospel challenges us to expand our notions of who deserves mercy. The passage is structured around three instances of mockery levelled against Jesus - first, by the Jewish leaders, second, by the soldiers, and then thirdly, by one of the criminals hanging alongside him. The mockeries tell us just how desperate things have become for Jesus. These taunts get closer and closer to him, giving the reader a sense that the forces against Jesus are closing in on him. The Jewish leaders are close enough for Jesus to hear them; the soldiers, who had already cast lots for his clothes, come up to Jesus at the foot of the cross as they mock him; and the final act of ridicule comes from someone hanging right next to him.

Each of these taunts challenge Jesus to save himself as a demonstration of who he is. It is ironic that, in their calls for Jesus to demonstrate his power to save himself, the leaders, the soldiers, and the criminal address him with titles, that from *their* perspective are insults, but actually, accurately confirm who Jesus is – *'God's Messiah'*, the *'Chosen One'*, the *'King of the Jews.'* Without realising it, they boldly pronounce Christian truths about Jesus, unable to see that Jesus' identity as *'Messiah,' 'chosen one,'* and *'King'* is inextricably linked to his crucifixion. What they think is impossible for Jesus to achieve on the cross is precisely *what* he is accomplishing. The moment where it looks utterly bleak and everything is lost, the battle is actually won. Luke knows, *we* know and *Jesus* knows that it is *precisely* his refusal to save himself, that means that he can save us. His refusal to save himself becomes a demonstration of his kingship, where the cross becomes the throne where Jesus is crowned Christ the King. And through *his* saving actions, *we* get to spend eternity with him in

his kingdom. The taunting of Jesus simply confirms what he has stated already – that they do not know what they are doing. They don't have a clue.

But not *all* are against Jesus at the cross. And support comes from an unlikely source. The taunting Jesus receives from the criminal surprisingly offends the other criminal crucified with Jesus. This second criminal accepts that they are '*condemned justly*' and deserve their punishment, whereas Jesus '*has done nothing wrong*'. From the cross, in their guilty states, they position themselves before Jesus very differently. The first criminal joins the others in rejecting Jesus and demands that he save them all from being crucified – '*Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!*' The second criminal also asks something of Jesus, but his earnest request contrasts the first criminal's selfish, disrespectful demand. While others in the scene use titles to mock Jesus, showing they do not really believe Jesus to be Messiah and King, this second criminal accepts in utter sincerity the inscription's identification of Jesus as 'King.' '*Jesus, when you come into your kingdom*', he says to him, '*remember me.*' He speaks to Jesus in a startlingly personal and intimate fashion, addressing him directly by name and not with a sarcastic use of a title. In response, Jesus grants him salvation. '*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*'

So, what was it that 'qualified' the criminal for paradise? Was it his statement of faith? Was it his contrition, repentance and a humble sense of self in relation to Jesus and his kingdom? Had he heard Jesus' words, '*Father, forgive them*', and included himself as one in need of this forgiveness? Did he, unlike the mockers, truly recognise Jesus as the Messiah?

Is this criminal one of those we might include in a scenario of '*Unlikely people to meet in paradise?*' And if we maybe think that Jesus got it wrong with this criminal, has it got it wrong with others? Are we concerned that when we get to heaven there will be people there who we will think certainly shouldn't be? But, if we think we could judge better, what might that look like? How would we decide who went to heaven or hell? What criteria would we use?

In the book '*The Shack*' by Paul Young, a book that came out in 2008 and was an instant bestseller - now a film - the main character, a husband and father called Mack, blames God for failing to prevent a family tragedy. There's a scene in the book where the person of the Holy Spirit, depicted as a woman, challenges Mack for judging God as a father who cannot be trusted, a father who failed him and failed his family. And this is how she responds.

“Mack, if you are able to judge God so easily, then you can certainly judge the world. You must choose one of your children to spend eternity in God’s new heavens and new earth, and the other to spend eternity in hell.”

“What?” he erupted, turning to her in disbelief.

Mack couldn’t believe what he was hearing and started to panic.

“Mackenzie.” Her voice now came as calm and wonderful as he first heard it. *“I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does. He knows every person conceived, and he knows them so much deeper and clearer than you will ever know your children. And he loves each one according to his knowledge of the being of that son or daughter. You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love?”*

“I suppose I do. I’ve just never thought about it.” He was stumbling over his words. *“And certainly not about anyone that I truly cared about.”*

“So you suppose that God does this easily, but you cannot? Come now, Mack. Which of your children will you sentence to hell? You’re the judge. You choose.”

“I don’t want to be the judge,” he said, standing up. Mack’s mind was racing. This couldn’t be real. How could God ask him to choose among his own children? There was no way he could sentence either of his children to an eternity in hell, even if they committed some awful crime. He couldn’t. For him, it wasn’t about their performance; it was about his love for them.

“I can’t do this,” he said softly.

“You must,” she replied.

“I will not do this!” Mack yelled. *“I can’t. I can’t. I won’t.”* The woman just stood watching and waiting. Finally he looked at her, pleading with his eyes. *“Could I go instead? I’ll go in their place. Would that work? Could I do that?”* He fell at her feet, crying and begging now. *“Please let me go for my children, please. I would be happy to ... please.”*

“Mackenzie, Mackenzie,” she whispered. Her hands gently touched his cheeks as she lifted him to his feet. Looking at her through blurring tears, he could see that her smile was radiant. *“Now you sound like Jesus. You have judged well. I am so proud of you.”*

“But I haven’t judged anything,” Mack offered in confusion.

“Oh, but you have. You have judged them worthy of love, even if it cost you everything. And that is how Jesus loves.”

And that’s what the Jewish leaders, the soldiers, the other criminal didn’t understand. *“Father, forgive them,”* Jesus said, *“for they do not understand.”*

For Jesus went to the cross for love, for his love for each and every one of us, irrespective of the good that we have done, and irrespective of the bad that we have done. Because it's not about us, but him, and his great love for us. He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice ... because of love. Was Jesus right to be merciful to the criminal who called him by name, and asked Jesus to remember him? To give him a place with him in paradise that day?

Would we instead prefer that he'd chosen justice? For although this is the way of our world, it isn't his way. He judged the criminal worthy of love, even if it cost him everything. And he judges each and every one of us worthy of love. And we know that it *did* cost him everything, but there was a reward. And we are the reward. Words from John 3:16 – well known words – *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Those words again – *'so loved.'*

If you leave today knowing nothing else, know that you are loved. Loved so much that Jesus willingly went to the cross for you, whoever you are. Loved so much that mercy triumphs over justice. Loved so much that Jesus wants to spend eternity with you. And that there is nothing, nothing at all that you can do to earn that love, or lose that love, nothing at all that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus Christ, the King.

Amen.