



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Three Times Luke 22:54-71

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On Friday of this coming week Anglicans around the world commemorate the Oxford Martyrs: Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Bishops Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer. Cranmer was the chief architect of the English Reformation and the author of the Book of Common Prayer. Ridley and Latimer were his close friends and fellow labourers. When Queen Mary ascended to the throne she had all three of them arrested. They were tortured and pressured to deny the doctrines of grace. Bishops Ridley and Latimer refused and were burned at the stake in Broad Street, Oxford on October 16, 1555. After months of torture, Archbishop Cranmer recanted his teaching, but was burned anyway, on the same spot five months later. And yet his last action as the flames rose up around him was to thrust his right hand into the fire—the hand with which he had signed his recantation—rescinding his recantation. These were men who stood for Jesus even though it meant losing their lives, but they don't stand alone. They stand with an army of martyrs that began with St. Stephen, who was stoned by the Jews for proclaiming the lordship of Jesus. They stand with those who have died for their faith yesterday: for the many brothers and sisters standing firm and dying for Jesus in the Middle East and with those just two weeks ago and closer to home in Oregon, who were not ashamed to stand for Jesus even as they saw their friends being murdered for doing so.

Brothers and sisters, even if we ourselves never face death for our faith, this is still the path that Jesus has called us to walk: a path of self-denial

as we proclaim the *truth* to the world. Some will hear it and believe. Some will believe because of our witness. But some will refuse it and only became angry. The truth is a threat when you've committed your life to a lie.

But not every believer stands firm for the truth. Thomas Cranmer gave way, albeit after months of torture. This morning we'll be looking at Luke 22:54-71. Here we see St. Peter's famous denial of Jesus—not once, not twice, but three times, and that even after Jesus had warned him it would happen. And yet the remarkable thing is that Peter went on to become the spokesman for the apostles and for the new Church in the book of Acts. He was the one preaching to the crowd of thousands on the Day of Pentecost. The good news is that when human beings, when men and women are afraid and fail to stand for the truth, Jesus stood for the truth for us and through his rejection, through his suffering, through his death, and through his resurrection he has redeemed us from our failures.

Let's look at Luke 22:54-55. In the last part of the chapter we saw Jesus arrested by the soldiers of the chief priests. Judas had already betrayed Jesus in leading the authorities to him. For just a moment the disciples drew their swords and went to battle for Jesus, but he stopped that before it could begin. Violence is not the way of the kingdom. But we got a sense of the urgency of the situation. Jesus has been stressing that this is the culmination of his ministry—that he's preparing for a final showdown with evil, with the devil, with sin and with death. He knew evil was about to do its *worst*, which is why he was in such agony as he prayed. He knew how awful it was going to be so he begged his Father to take this cup from him—if there was some other way—but there wasn't. And we got a hint of what's happening here as Jesus rebuked the chief priests: They had turned the temple into a den of robbers and like robbers they had poured forth

under cover of darkness to arrest him. As George Caird put it so well, "The darkness is Satan's realm, and those who do Satan's business keep Satan's hours." Luke now goes on:

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them.

What was Peter thinking and feeling at this point? Jesus was his master and his friend. He had pledged his life to Jesus when he left his fishing boat on the shore of Lake Galilee and just a few hours before he had pledged his life to Jesus again. When the soldiers came for Jesus Peter drew his sword and charged into the fray. Maybe he thought Jesus would miraculously finish what he and the disciples had started. Aside from that there was no hope for this little group of men and their two swords against the soldiers of the chief priest. If Jesus didn't do something big, Peter would die with his sword in his hand. He charged in and cut off a man's ear. Score one for team Jesus! And then Jesus put a stop to the violence and allowed himself to be led away in chains. He even healed the man Peter had hurt. Peter must have been confused and angry and feeling more than a little disenchanted. How was the kingdom going to come if Jesus was dead? Wanting to know he followed the mob back to the house of the chief priest. He kept his distance and when he got there no one recognised him as the hot head who had tried to defend Jesus. He even managed to get into the courtyard, close to the fire, and surrounded by the soldiers and the mob. But before too long someone recognised him. Luke goes on:

Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying,

“Woman, I do not know him.” (Luke 22:56-57)

Disaster averted! Peter sat there a while longer. He watched the soldiers mocking and beating Jesus, his master and friend. And then someone else recognised him:

And a little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not.” (Luke 22:58)

Disaster averted again. But as it turns out this man and the servant girl weren't the only ones to recognise him. Imagine Peter sitting there with his head down, watching for another hour as Jesus is mocked and beaten and interrogated.

And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, “Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.” But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” (Luke 22:59-60a)

Think about that. We all know the story so well we may not notice the time Luke tells us passed between Peter's denials of Jesus and what was going on as Peter sat there watching Jesus being abused by the chief priest's soldiers. He thought no one would recognise him, but a servant girl points him out. We might miss the significance of that if we forget that a slave's testimony was worthless in that world and a slave girl's testimony even less, if that's possible. Peter had little, if anything, to fear from her accusation and yet in response to it he renounces Jesus completely: “I do not know him!”

Time passed—time for Peter to contemplate what Jesus had taught about just this sort of situation. In 9:25-26 he had told them:

What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits

himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory.

Or,

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.... I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. (Luke 12:4, 8-9)

Or,

They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.... I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.... You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. (Luke 21:12-15, 17-19)

Peter had time to think on these things. He had a mouth to bear witness, but he used his mouth to renounce Jesus. He began by renouncing Jesus himself. When the second accusation came, pointing him out as “one of them”, Peter renounced his membership in Jesus' family and his place in the new Israel, shouting “I am not!” And then a whole hour passed—a whole hour to think, to reconsider, to repent, to finally bear witness to Jesus. Someone else recognised him as being from Galilee—one of the men who had been with Jesus from the very start. Galilee was where Jesus met Peter by his fishing boat and called him to be a fisher of men. That was where Peter had left everything and had committed to following Jesus.

And now at the name of Galilee, Peter renounces it all: “I don't know what you're talking about!”

Luke goes on in verses 60-62:

And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

This is precisely what Jesus had prophesied the evening before. There was Peter denying Jesus because Jesus wasn't meeting his expectations, there he was denying Jesus because Jesus had rebuked him for drawing his sword to protect him, there was Peter denying Jesus as he saw the one he expected to be King being mocked and beaten by the Jewish authorities. He denied Jesus because at the moment when everything counted Jesus had failed to fulfil his expectations, and so Peter had written Jesus off as a fraud. But now the rooster crows and proves that Jesus was no false prophet. Peter should have known better and now the rooster proves it. Jesus isn't in the wrong for not meeting Peter's messianic expectations; Peter simply had the wrong expectations. And he realises this as Jesus turns and looks at him. This is the language that Luke uses over and over to describe Jesus rebuking his opponents: he turns to them. And now he turns to Peter, his friend who has renounced him and Peter runs and weeps. He still doesn't understand. How can Jesus be the Messiah if he's going to be beaten and executed? But he knows that somehow it's true. Somehow Jesus is the Messiah and he, Peter, had just renounced him three times: his friend and his master and his saviour.

With Peter gone, Luke now turns to Jesus. What's been going on during this time that Peter was sitting and

watching and denying? Look at verses 63-65:

Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.

Jesus claimed to be a prophet so they blindfold and then beat him and demand he tell them who it was who beat him. Ironically, Jesus was just proved a prophet to Peter when the rooster crowed. Ironically, Jesus is proved a prophet even as these men beat him. Think of the parable Jesus told of the wicked tenants. They tried to take the vineyard for themselves. The owner sent his servants to reclaim it and the tenants beat them and sent them away. Finally, he sent his son whom they beat and killed. As the soldiers mock and blaspheme Jesus they prove his own prophecies true, they confirm that he really is the Messiah.

Luke goes on:

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. (Luke 22:66)

This is the Sanhedrin—the governing body of the Jews. These were the men who had inherited the authority passed down from Moses to see that *righteousness* and *justice* were done in Israel. They were the ones called to proclaim the Lord’s truth to the nations. But these men sitting in the seat of Moses were so stuck in, so blinded by their self-serving ideas about the Lord and about his kingdom that they were incapable of righteousness and justice. They had believed the lies of the devil for so long that when they were confronted by the truth of Jesus the only thing they could see was a threat to

themselves, their power, their authority, and to everything they stood for. They had spent the week trying to dig up dirt on Jesus. They had spent the week listening to him teach and waiting for him to say something they could use to arrest him. Now, with Jesus in chains in their council chamber, they go after more they can use against him.

Jesus has already accused them of being duped by and in league with the devil. Now they ask him a series of questions that begin just like the questions the devil had asked Jesus when he tempted him in the wilderness: “If you are the Son of God...” Look again at verse 66:

And they led him away to their council, and they said, “If you are the Christ, tell us.” But he said to them, “If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer.” (Luke 22:66-67)

Jesus knew there was no point defending or explaining himself. These men were too lost in the devil’s deception. What was going to happen was going to happen. In fact, what was going to happen *had* to happen. This is Jesus shaking the dust from his feet as they reject him. It’s an awful indictment and an awful condemnation, and one that goes right over their heads. But even though he refuses to defend himself, he still rebukes them. In verse 69 he says:

“But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.”

“From now on”. That’s the phrase Luke uses to tell us that something new is beginning. Jesus warns the Sanhedrin that the present age is passing away and the age to come is breaking in. Jesus often referred to himself as Daniel’s son of Man, but he’s mostly been doing that to highlight his coming rejection. That rejection is now taking place and so

Jesus turns to the other important aspect of the son of Man character in Daniel. He’s also the one who, after being rejected and suffering at the hands of evil men, comes on the clouds to the Ancient of Days and is vindicated and given sovereignty and a throne. Jesus also appeals again to Psalm 110:1: “The LORD said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

The Jewish elders understand what he’s saying as he claims to be the son of Man vindicated and exalted by the Father. And that brings them back to their original question. If Jesus is claiming that he will soon be seated at God’s right hand with power, he must also be claiming to be the Son of God. They know the Scriptures. In Psalm 2:6-7 the Lord sets his “King on Mount Zion, on the holy hill and he decrees to that King, “You are my Son”. And so they come back to their original question:

So they all said, “Are you the Son of God, then?” And he said to them, “You say that I am.”

As he’s done so many times before, Jesus turns their questions against them. They end up confessing his identity themselves even as they deny it and in doing so they convict themselves. Of course, this is also just what they need to fulfil their machinations against him. Luke goes on in verse 71:

Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”

They want Jesus dead, but only the Romans had the authority to carry out executions. The Romans wouldn’t care about Jesus’ theology. They wouldn’t care if he were a false prophet. But they would care if Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah or if he was claiming to be a king. Men who claimed to be the Messiah were

notorious for disturbing the peace and starting revolts. Men who claimed to be king were potential rivals to Caesar. That was the sort of thing the Romans cared about and now they had it: Jesus not only claimed to be the Son of God—which was blasphemy—he was also claiming to be a king. The Sanhedrin could now take Jesus before Pilate, the Roman governor.

Luke is leading us step by step to the foot of the cross, but here we see *why* Jesus went to the cross. He went to the cross for sinners, but here we get a sense of what “sinner” means. He went to the cross for Peter, who despite walking with him, seeing his ministry and his character and hearing him preach for three years, rejected him so easily, whether out of fear for his life or out of anger when Jesus rebuked him for trying to defend him. Jesus went to the cross for men like the chief priest’s soldiers and the mob who arrested him, who beat him, who mocked him, and who blasphemed him. Jesus went to the cross for the priests and scholars and politicians who had twisted the Scriptures and who had perverted justice, manipulating God’s people for the sake of their own agenda and their own power and their own authority. Jesus went to the cross for his people, Israel, because they had failed, because her light had turned to darkness, because she had turned to cursing the nations rather than blessing them—some like Peter, some like the soldiers, some like the priests and elders.

But Brothers and Sisters, God elected Israel to be humanity’s *representative*. Each of us can find our own rebellion, our own sin in these people, whether Peter or the soldiers or the priests. If we can’t see ourselves in all of these categories in some way I think we can at least find ourselves in at least one or two of them. How often do we turn away from Jesus out of fear? None of us have ever faced the threat of martyrdom for the sake of Jesus, but

that only makes it worse that we are so easily silent about him, fearing that people will think we’re too religious or that we’re fanatics. We may never intend to mock or blaspheme Jesus, but when others get going, how often do we allow ourselves to be dragged into their blasphemous “fun”? And how often do we twist the Scriptures or the Good News to serve our own purposes, to condemn instead of to redeem, to build ourselves up while tearing others down? Jesus endured all of our sins that night he was arrested and he took them with him to the cross, where they were nailed there with him. Brothers and sisters, as we read the Passion story it’s inevitable that we cry for Jesus as he suffers rejection and torture and death. But we should also feel shame as we make our way with Luke and with Jesus to the cross in these last chapters of the Gospel. We should identify with Peter and with the soldiers and with the priests and scribes. What they did to Jesus we have done to Jesus. This is what sin looks like. It’s not just an abstract theological concept; it’s *real*. At its root, no matter what form it takes, it is rebellion against and rejection of the God who loves us. But Friends, that also means that the redemption Jesus bought at the cross is just as real. At the cross we find love and mercy and grace poured out for sinners—not for people who deserve it, but for people who have been living in rebellion: again, people like Peter and the soldiers and the priests—people like us. And Peter is the example at the centre of today’s passage. He rejected and renounced Jesus, but Jesus refused to let go of him. Jesus died for *Peter’s* sins, Jesus died for *Peter’s* rebellion, Jesus died to give *Peter* a new life. And because of the Cross, because of that new life, because Jesus refused to renounce Peter, the new Israel was born. And the same is true for us. Jesus died for *our* sins, Jesus died for *our* rebellion, Jesus died to give *us* new life. Jesus has called us and he will not let go of us until he has brought us into his

kingdom, until he has made us whole, until he has filled us with the life of his Spirit so that we, his Church, can be his light to the world, making righteousness and justice known, lifting high the cross, and proclaiming that the kingdom has come and that Jesus is Lord.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks that you have not given up on your rebellious children, but instead, in Jesus, you have given yourself to be a sacrifice for our sins. You call us, you redeem us, you give us life, you fill us with your Holy Spirit that we might once again be your faithful people. Give us grace to continue to follow Jesus amidst the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, that we might always live for you and for your kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ, who died and rose again for us. Amen.