



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### When You Come into Your Kingdom

Luke 23:27-43

Fr. William Klock

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Saint Luke sets Jesus on the final road to the cross with the words, in verse 26, that “they led him away”. “They” were Roman soldiers—probably the same soldiers who had whipped and beaten Jesus. The usual custom was to assign four soldiers to each condemned man as he carried the horizontal crossbeam to which he would be tied or nailed. But Luke’s “they” includes not just the soldiers; its real focus is on those *responsible* for Jesus’ death. “They” were the Sanhedrin, made up of the scribes and elders and chief priests of the Jews; “they” were the people of Jerusalem who had cried out with their leaders that Pilate crucify Jesus; “they” were Pilate and Herod, Caesar’s representatives who had found no wrong in Jesus, but sent him to his death anyway for political reasons and to placate the angry Jewish mob. As I said last Sunday, “they” also includes us, even though we weren’t there. Jesus, an innocent man, went to the cross for the sake of sinners—for the sake of violent revolutionaries like Barabbas, for sake of corrupt priests, for the sake of his own people, who had rejected the Lord’s loving covenant, for the Romans who whipped and beat him and nailed him to the cross. Jesus died for sinners. Jesus died for all of us.

The crowds mocked and jeered at Jesus as he stumbled through the streets under the weight of the heavy crossbeam. Many of them were probably amongst the crowd who had hailed him as King just a few days before when he had entered the city. They had placed their hopes in him.

Maybe in Jesus of Nazareth the Lord was finally hearing their cries for deliverance. Maybe in Jesus, the Lord would finally visit his people and defeat their enemies. Jesus got their hopes up. And now he’s been utterly humiliated by the authorities and is on his way to be executed. Jesus was a failure. And they were angry with him for getting their hopes up. And yet, Luke tells us that not everyone was angry, not everyone was mocking him. Look at 23:27.

**And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him.**

There with the angry crowd is a group of women weeping and wailing and beating their breasts in grief. They may have been singing a funeral dirge. Whether they were real supporters or disciples of Jesus we don’t know, but in him they at least saw an innocent Jewish man being wrongly handed over to the Romans for a brutal death that he did not deserve. But their mourning is misdirected. Luke goes on in verses 28-31:

**But turning to them Jesus said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’**

Jesus calls them “Daughters of Jerusalem”. They represent the whole nation. He probably saw them fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (12:10-14) that speaks of all Jerusalem mourning “him whom they have pierced”. Jesus turns to them. He turns to them the same way he turned to Peter when the rooster crowed. When Jesus turns to someone, he turns

to rebuke or to chide them—to set them straight. And here he tells these weeping women that their mourning is misplaced. Jesus may be going to his death, but he’s going to his death for a good cause. Things may look bleak on Good Friday, but the glory of Easter Sunday is only three days away. No, what these women should really be mourning is the coming day of judgement that Jesus has been warning everyone about.

Jesus is being led away to be crucified because Israel has rejected him and, in rejecting him, has confirmed her own apostasy—in crucifying Jesus, Israel has utterly abandoned her covenant with the Lord. Think again of the parable of the wicked tenants. The man who owned the vineyard sent his servants—the Old Testament prophets—to claim what rightfully belonged to him, but the tenants—Israel—beat them and sent them back to their master empty-handed. Finally, in Jesus, the Lord has sent his own Son. Israel had been given every chance to return to the Lord, she had been given every chance to repent and return to covenant faithfulness, she had been given every chance to pick up her calling and her mission to be light to the world. This is what Jesus’ ministry was all about. He knew Israel would fail to repent, but he called her to repentance anyway and while Israel confirmed her apostasy by rejecting him, he did call forth from her a faithful remnant—a new Israel to be reconstituted in himself. But as Israel confirmed her apostasy by crying out for Jesus’ crucifixion, she also sealed her own coming judgement. It was coming—as Jesus said, before the generation then alive passed away (Luke 21:32)—and it would be terrible. On that day the Lord would prune the dead wood from the vine to which Jesus had returned life. That’s the day these women ought to be mourning. That’s the judgement they ought to be fearing. They ought to be weeping for themselves and for their children. Why? Because those days will be so awful that barrenness will actually be a blessing. To be unable to

bear children was, particularly in that culture, a curse. It was the worst thing that could happen to a woman—to be unable to be a mother. But in the coming days when the Romans fell on Jerusalem, bringing the Lord’s judgement on her, mothers would have to watch as their sons—recruited by violent revolutionaries—would be marched out of the city in similar processions to be crucified by the hundreds. Mothers would watch as their children died at the hands of Roman soldiers or starved during the siege of the city. Some mothers would even face the choice of whether or not to eat their own children to survive. Better not to be a mother at all than to face the coming judgement of the Lord.

Jesus quotes the words of Hosea 8:10. In the days of the prophet Hosea, Israel had prostituted herself to foreign gods. When judgement came, it would be so awful that she would pray for the mountains to fall on her and the hills to cover her, just to put an end to her suffering. So it will be in the days to come. Jesus says to the mourning women, “If the they do these things when the wood is green”—if the Romans are willing now to brutally crucify an innocent man—“what will happen when it is dry?”—how much worse will it be for you when your sons have actually have risen up in open revolt? The coming judgement of the Lord on Jerusalem is sure. They Lord never judges, he never punishes without first having given the guilty an opportunity to prove their guilt. As Jesus goes to the cross Israel’s guilt is proved and her doom is sealed. *But*, even as he pronounces judgement, Jesus is also calling for repentance. Judgement will come, but it’s never too late to repent. The dead wood may be cut off, but it can be grafted back into Jesus, the living vine, at any time—repentance and faith are all that are necessary.

Luke goes on with the gruesome procession in verses 32-33:

**Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.**

Now we see that Jesus wasn’t alone. There were two other men carrying their crosses too. Luke simply describes them as “criminals”, but the Romans didn’t crucify ordinary criminals. Crucifixion was reserved for political criminals—usually for people involved in revolt or rebellion against Roman authority. Jesus was being crucified because he claimed to be King of the Jews. Barabbas had been awaiting crucifixion as a revolutionary. I don’t think it’s at all a stretch to think that Jesus literally took Barabbas’ place and that these two “criminals” had been involved in Barabbas’ revolutionary plot. Crosses had been prepared for Barabbas and his friends, but Barabbas had been set free and his cross laid on Jesus.

The soldiers lead the three to a place that Luke calls “The Skull”—a hill just outside the city wall that looks like the dome of a skull. It was just the sort of prominent public place the Romans preferred for crucifixions. And Luke says that there Jesus was crucified with the two criminals—nailed to a crossbeam, and then lifted into place to hang, in utter agony, barely able to breathe, and eventually to die of asphyxiation. This is the fate that Israel was destined to face in those days when she would cry out for the mountains to fall on her. Israel had rejected the Lord. Israel refused to know the way that leads to peace. She would rise up against Rome and as he had so many times in the past, the Lord would send judgement in the form of pagan armies. Jerusalem would be laid waste, her temple torn stone from stone, and her sons would be crucified by the thousands. And yet here was Jesus receiving

Jerusalem’s punishment—one man bearing the sins of the many. And in that there was hope. There, as he gasped for breath, Jesus prayed for his enemies:

**“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** (Luke 23:34a)

Even in apostasy there is hope. Both the Jews and Romans had been deceived—both had been duped by the Satan into rebellion against God. Humanity was lost in darkness, but that’s the point. Jesus came to bring light. Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem. And that’s precisely what he’s doing here. Lost in its own deception, the world looked at Jesus and saw a deceived man, a fool, a failed Messiah. Luke makes that point in the verses that follow:

**And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”** (Luke 23:34b-38)

As if Jesus hasn’t been humiliated enough already, the soldiers strip him naked and gamble for his clothes. The people—representing Jerusalem—stand passively by, watching and doing nothing as the greatest wrong, the greatest sin of human history is carried out at Jesus’ expense. Again, this is the devil, this is evil, this is sin, this is death doing the absolute *worst* it could possibly do. The people, Luke says, stood watching. The Jewish “rulers”—the elders, scribes, and chief priests—mock him as he hangs dying: “If he’s the Messiah, if he’s the Chosen One, let him save himself!” They take us back to the

beginning of the story. In his baptism, Jesus was confirmed as the Lord's chosen and as the Lord's Messiah. From there he went into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil—tempted to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, to force God's hand. Angels would rescue him before he hit the ground below. All Jerusalem would see it and know that he was the Messiah. Jesus could "save himself" and usher in the kingdom of God. Jesus could have ushered in his kingdom that way. People would have hailed him as King. There would have been no cross—but that's just it. Without the cross, Jesus would still be King, but humanity would still be in bondage to sin and death. The cross—the very thing that the people took as proof that Jesus was a false messiah was actually the proof that he is indeed the real Messiah.

The rulers weren't the only ones to mock him. Luke says that the soldiers mocked him too. They placed a sign over his head reading "This is the King of the Jews". The sign was simple. It was meant to declare to the world the charge against Jesus. His crucifixion was meant to be a warning to anyone else foolish enough to rival Caesar by claiming to be King of the Jews. For the soldiers it a reason to mock Jesus. They too jeer at him. If he's a king, where are his people to save him? And they play at being the king's cupbearer, but instead of a golden cup filled with costly wine, they soak a sponge in vinegar, put it on a spear and jab it in his face. And yet Jesus, beaten, bloody, mocked, and dying shows precisely what a real King looks like. The world around him took it all as proof that he was no king, but Luke shows us the King in humility as he lovingly gives his life for the sake of his rebellious subjects and prays for their forgiveness.

And how do we respond? Luke reminds us of the two criminals crucified beside Jesus. Look at verses 39:

**One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"**

Even as he hangs there dying the first of the two men aligns himself with the Jews and with the Romans. He has no sympathy at all for the innocent man. Like the others he mocks Jesus: "If you're the Christ, if you're the Messiah, save yourself!" It's beyond his ability to fathom that perhaps the real mission of the Messiah is to die for the sake of others. Again, this is the problem. Israel rejected the Messiah because she had lost sight of the mission she had been given through Abraham and through Moses. She was meant to be the means by which knowledge of the Lord was returned to the human race. But Israel had turned her mission upside-down. The only Messiah she could now envision was one who would judge the nations and vindicate her—the idea of the Messiah giving his life for her sake and for the sake of her enemies was foolish—it was an idea she could only mock and jeer at.

And yet, as he too hung there dying, the other criminal began to understand. Luke goes on in verse 40:

**But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:40-42)**

The second man rebuked not only his friend, but everyone else gathered there. He saw them all mocking Jesus and yet he knew—he had some sense—of who Jesus was. It should have been Barabbas—the violent revolutionary and murderer—hanging there on the cross next to him, but

instead there was Jesus and he *knew* Jesus didn't belong there. This man was a bad guy and he knew—he could see it, he knew it instinctively—that Jesus was no bad guy, that he was innocent. Of all the people there on that little hill that day, it was a criminal condemned to die who recognised Jesus' innocence and who recognised Jesus for who he really was. Only he stood up for Jesus, rebuking his friend: "Do you not fear God? Are you trying to make things worse for yourself? How can you, a man justly condemned, mock this innocent man?"

The second man acknowledges his guilt. He and the other man are receiving justice in their crucifixions—they're receiving their "due rewards", their just desserts. They did wrong and now they're being justly punished. In confessing his sin, the second man repents. And he turns in faith to Jesus. He doesn't understand very much, but he understands enough. Jesus is the King, he's the Messiah even if the crowds say he is not. The fact that he's obviously innocent and yet still being mocked and crucified proves it. This criminal is the first to recognise that Jesus' death is not a contradiction of his messiahship, but, very much to the contrary, it's confirmation of it. And he's the first to recognise that it is through the cross that Jesus is enthroned as King. This condemned man is the first. Realising who Jesus is he turns to him. He knows his own guilt, but he also knows that if Jesus is the King, somehow and someday Jesus can do something about it. He's the innocent giving his life as a sacrifice for the guilty. And so this man turns to Jesus and asks in faith, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." "Jesus, I don't know fully understand what's happening here, but in you I see a King. Whenever it happens, however it happens, when you are vindicated, when you are finally seated on your throne as King, please remember

me—make a place for me in your kingdom.”

**And [Jesus] said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”**

Even as all Jerusalem was mocking Jesus, this one man put faith in him as King and Jesus responded with words of assurance. This one verse probably merits a sermon all on its own.

“Paradise” was a word the Jews used to describe the Garden of Eden and to describe the place where the faithful went to live in some way in the presence of the Lord while they awaited the end of the age when he would resurrect his people to life. There was plenty more that needed to happen before that last day at the end of the age. Jesus’ own resurrection three days later would be one of the indicators showing that the present age is nearing its end and giving way to the age to come. But Jesus and the redeemed criminal didn’t have the time or the need to talk eschatology as they hung there dying. In response to this man’s repentance and faith, Jesus simply assured him: “Today you will be with me.” That was enough.

Brothers and Sisters, this is what true kingship looks like. The true King gives his life for the sake of his people—even as they mock him, reject him, and kill him. Yes, the true King must judge the rebellion of his people and he will, but out of love for them he will first give his own life for their sake, providing a means of redemption and restoration. This was the Lord’s plan all along—to redeem rebellious humanity from sin and death and to restore us to his fellowship, to his presence, to his kingdom. And Jesus, as he reveals his kingship by giving himself for the sake of his enemies shows us what that kingdom looks like—he shows us what it means to be part of it. He spent his ministry embracing all the wrong people. He spent his ministry offering peace to all the wrong people. He went to the

poor, to the sick, to the unclean, to the sinful, to the hated, to the despised, to the outsiders—to the lost sheep—and offered them a place in the kingdom. To those who had denied them that place, to those who had exploited the kingdom for their own gain, their own pride, their own ambition he gave warning: unless they repent, their dead wood would soon be pruned from the living vine.

We enter the kingdom of Jesus as we repent in faith—just like the criminal dying on the cross next to him. We give up our old selves, our old sources of security, our old sins—we give up everything that is not Jesus—and we take hold of him in faith and we follow him as he makes us new—and not only makes us new, but all Creation with us. Our job now, as his kingdom people, is to proclaim the Good News that in his death, resurrection, and ascension he is Lord and that he has conquered sin and death. Our job is to give our lives for the sake of the world, just as he has, that the people in darkness around us might see the light of Christ. Our job is to show the world the justice and righteousness, the love and peace, the mercy and grace of the Kingdom of God—to give the world a foretaste of the new creation, of the New Jerusalem. And we can never forget that to proclaim the Good News is to call people to repentance. To take hold of Jesus we must let go of everything else. The kingdom is not Caesar plus Jesus; it’s not money plus Jesus; it’s not sex plus Jesus; it’s not “things and stuff” plus Jesus; it’s not self plus Jesus. It’s *just* Jesus. He is Lord and nothing else. The awful judgement that came on rebellious Jerusalem was a foretaste of the judgement to come on rebellious humanity, but there is hope. Jesus died—one for the many, the innocent for the guilty—that through faith we might be redeemed rather than condemned. Brothers and Sisters, that is the message we are to preach, that is

the message we are to live, that is the message for which he are to die.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, as tempting as it is to look down on the characters in our lesson today: on the crowd, silent as so much evil was done; on the religious leaders mocking Jesus; on the Roman soldiers who crucified him; on the criminal who used his last breath to mock him, remind us Lord that like lost sheep we have all gone astray, we are all sinners and as sinners we are all in need of your grace. Thank you for not giving us over to judgement, but for giving your Son to be a sacrifice for our sins. Thank you for giving us life and for making us new. Teach us to be faithful as we seek to follow Jesus and so fill our hearts with gratitude and joy that we will be by our very nature witnesses to Jesus and to his kingdom. We ask this in his name. Amen.