

The King of the Jews

Luke 23:26-43

There's just so much to say about the crucifixion of Christ, isn't there? We could talk about how Jesus is the Passover lamb, slain so that God would not punish us for our sins. We could remember that Jesus is the one perfect sacrifice offered up on behalf of all His people, taking onto Himself all the consequences prescribed in the Law of Moses, dying so that we might live. We could thus be amazed that all the Old Testament Scriptures are in one way or another fulfilled in Christ – but Luke doesn't emphasize any of these points.

On the other hand, we might be drawn to the sufferings of Christ. We might be moved to tears, as we meditate on how the soldiers beat Him, and pressed a crown of thorns down on His head. But Luke doesn't mention either of these details, either.

Or we might focus on that greatest of all mysteries, on the heartbreak of God Himself. We might wonder how God the Father could turn His face away from God the Son, tearing the very fabric of the Holy Trinity, absorbing within His own divine essence the punishment due to the sins of mortal men. We might thus listen in awe and wonder to Jesus' greatest cry of anguish: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" But Luke doesn't include this part of the story, either.

Now, make no mistake, Luke doesn't deny the reality of Christ's suffering, and he certainly doesn't minimize it. It's just that he wants to focus on something else. Instead of emphasizing the terrible things that happened to Jesus, Luke turns our attention to what Jesus says and does. For in Luke's account, far from being merely a passive sacrifice, Jesus remains an active participant in everything that goes on around Him. Far from being helpless, Jesus is very much in charge of the situation. We might even say that Jesus behaves like a King.

This is certainly true with regard to Jesus' conversation with the women of Jerusalem. Now, they had the same reaction to this horrible spectacle that we would like to think we would have experienced: they were simply overcome by the pain, the suffering, the humiliation, the blood. Their tears were thus a perfectly natural response to someone else's pain: indeed, their tears testify to the tenderness of their hearts.

But instead of thanking them for their concern, Jesus expressed an even greater concern for them. For His was not the only tragedy that the people of Jerusalem would see. His was not the only blood that would run in those streets.

For you see, some forty years after the Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross, they would do exactly what Jesus predicted. They would lay siege to the city, causing countless women and children to die of starvation. But the historian Josephus tells us that no laments were made for them because those that managed to survive were simply too weak: "Those who were just going to die looked upon those that were gone to their rest before them with dry eyes and open mouths. A deep silence, a kind of deadly night had seized upon the city." No, in the days of the siege there were no tears, for the starving inhabitants of Jerusalem would be too dehydrated to cry.

Eventually, of course, the Romans breached the wall of the city. The Temple was burned, and the city was plundered. In fact, Josephus says that the entire city was "covered with those that were killed either by the famine or the rebellion; and all was full of dead bodies such as had perished." And after conquering the city, the Romans totally destroyed it, laying the entire city wall even with the ground. In fact, Josephus tells us that "there was left nothing to make those that came there believe it had ever been inhabited."

It is these events of which Jesus warned the women of Jerusalem, predicting that the people who would endure the siege would prefer to have the mountains and the hills fall on them rather than to die by starvation or by the sword. But He drew these words of warning from an even earlier prophecy, one which Hosea had proclaimed over 700 years before Christ, concerning the city of Samaria in the Kingdom of Israel.

For in that tenth chapter of his prophecy, Hosea predicted that the same thing would happen to Samaria that ended up happening to Jerusalem so many years later: "Tumult shall arise among your people and all your

fortresses shall be plundered.” In fact, Hosea specifically predicted that mothers would be dashed in pieces along with their children.

And all that indeed came to pass in 722 B.C., when the Assyrians destroyed the city of Samaria and carried the people of Israel off into exile. But why did that earlier tragedy take place? Hosea told the people of his time: “You have plowed wickedness; You have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, because you trusted in your own way, in the multitude of your mighty men.”

And hadn't the people of Jerusalem done the same thing, some 700 years later, when they crucified Jesus? Hadn't they also listened to the lies of their leaders? Hadn't they rejected their King? Hadn't they turned away from their God, even as He stood before them in the flesh?

And so even as Jesus was on His way to the cross, He continued to rule and to reign. For in His words to the women of Jerusalem, He wasn't just quoting from a 700-year-old prophecy. No, He was pronouncing His righteous judgment on the people and on the city which were in the process of rejecting Him. And He did so by using Himself as an example: if such horrible things could happen to Him, to someone sinless and holy, someone who was green and living, what should the people expect to happen to dead, dry wood, to those who had plowed wickedness and reaped iniquity? In short, if the Romans would crucify an innocent man just because it was the politically expedient thing to do, what would they do to a whole nation of troublemakers?

Yes, there can be no doubt that Jesus was delivering a truly royal judgment. But He did this not out of anger, but out of sorrow. And that's because His love for His people never falters or fails, no matter what they do to Him. That's why He urged the women of Jerusalem to weep for themselves. And that's also why, even as the nails were being driven into His wrists, He could pray, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

But how could He possibly say such a thing? After all, it's hard enough for us to believe that, in the midst of His terrible pain and weakness, Jesus would take the time to warn the women of Jerusalem of their impending doom. It's even harder for us to realize that when He spoke to those women, He was concerned only for them and for their future, taking no thought of His own considerable problems.

But how could Jesus beg God's forgiveness for the very people who screamed for His blood, for the very people who denied their true King and preferred Barabbas the terrorist, for the very people who were in the very act of nailing Him to the cross?

Now, we could understand if Jesus had instead continued to quote the words of Hosea, this time from chapter 11: “Because they refused to return to me, the sword will whirl against their cities and will demolish their gates and consume them because of their counsels. So My people are bent on turning from Me. Though the prophets call them to the One on high, none at all exalts Him.” We could understand it if Jesus were to give up on such spiteful, rebellious ingrates like them – and like us.

But that's only because we don't understand the heart of God. For immediately after his condemnation of a wicked and ungrateful people, Hosea speaks these words from God: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I *am* God, and not man, The Holy One in your midst; And I will not come with terror.”

No, if any of us had been in Jesus' place, there's no way we would have shown such love in the midst of such pain, such patience in the midst of such hatred, such forbearance in the face of such cruel violence. No, we have a hard enough time being civil to our friends in the midst of our daily annoyances and irritations.

But the King of the Jews is God, and not man. That's why the Holy One in our midst never stops loving His enemies, even when we are at our spiteful, rebellious worst. That's why He didn't come in wrath, but in weakness. That's why the King of the Jews came to rule and to reign, not with a crown, but with a cross.

And He did not come in vain. After all, Luke records for us the story, the miracle really, of the very first believer. For the first person to embrace Jesus as the sort of Messiah He actually was, well, he wasn't one of Jesus'

twelve disciples, for they had all abandoned Him. No, the first person to bow the knee in submission to the King of the Jews was one of the two thieves crucified alongside Him.

Now, there's nothing that can explain this man's faith except a miracle. After all, when this nameless thief looked at Jesus, he only saw the same thing that the other thief hanging on the other cross saw – the same thing that everyone else could see: not a mighty Messiah, but a crucified criminal; not a Lord but a loser. No matter what the inscription over Jesus' head might have said, no one on that hill really thought He was the King of the Jews.

No one except this one thief. Somehow, his heart was moved to confess his own sinfulness. Somehow, he could discern that Jesus was in fact innocent of any crime. And somehow this thief realized that even though He and Jesus were both going to die that day, that Jesus was nevertheless somehow going to come into His kingdom. And so, he trusted Jesus, not because Jesus promised to release both of them from their bonds and bring healing to their bodies. No, even though this thief had no reason to expect that he would get anything out of it in this world, he still confessed that Jesus was the crucified Christ, the true King of the Jews.

How could he possibly make such a profession of faith? We return to our responsive reading from Hosea chapter 11: "They will walk after the Lord. He will roar like a lion; indeed He will roar and His sons will come trembling" from every direction. And that's exactly what happened. While they were both hanging on a cross, one of the two thieves heard the roar of the Lion of Judah. One of the two thieves recognized the call of his crucified King and came trembling. And it was this man to whom Jesus made a promise: to be with Jesus in Paradise. Hosea put the same promise this way, "I will place them in their houses." For what better way could we describe Paradise than simply as the place where our King lives with us?

Yes, along with this believing thief it is on the cross that we still see most clearly the King of the Jews, reigning in all His glory. For the cross of Christ is the clearest royal declaration of His judgment, not just on the people of Jerusalem, but on the sins of the whole world. In the cross we see nothing more and nothing less than the punishment our sins deserve, the punishment that, unless we put our trust in Jesus, we will some day in one way or another experience for ourselves.

But in that same cross, we also see most clearly the forgiveness that our King offers, not just to those who drove the nails in His hands, but to all of us. For it was Jesus who died on that cruel cross to pay for the sins of all His people. In the cross we thus see His promise to save all those like the repentant thief, all those who will confess their need of Him, and who will place their trust in Him.

But if the cross pronounces a royal judgment and promises a royal pardon it also prescribes the way the servants of the King must live. For the fact is that, no matter how much the rulers and the soldiers taunted Him, Jesus didn't come down from the cross: He couldn't have if we were to be saved, if our sins were to be forgiven. Moreover, we can't deny that His first follower died on a cross along with Him. For you see, Jesus didn't save that repentant thief from his sufferings. Instead, He saved that thief in the midst of his sufferings.

And that continues to be the truth about the Christian life. For if the character of our King – His justice, His love and forgiveness, and His welcome for repentant sinners – is most clearly displayed in the cross, then the character of our King will be most clearly displayed in us as we follow Him to the same kind of cross. Yes, other people will see Jesus in us most clearly when we do as He did: when we think of others in the midst of our own sufferings, when we love and forgive even those who hurt us most deeply, and when we welcome even those who are most despised in the eyes of the world.

Behold the King of the Jews. Behold His justice, His forgiveness, and His love. Will you bow before Him as your King? Will you take up your cross and follow Him?