

CURSED IS HE WHO HANGS ON THE TREE LUKE 23:35-43

INTRODUCTION

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. When I was growing up in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ, that really didn't mean much. I suspect we viewed such ideas as Catholic and we were not very fond of the Catholics. But we have been under the influence of forces that require of us that we deal with one another across these old divisions we thought permanent. I spent four months early in my education in the presence and under the influence of Christians from all across the globe of all kinds of expressions. When I was at First Christian I used to write my sermons on Friday and would go to the library of Saint Mary's Seminary on Roland Avenue to do so. Late morning the seminary community would worship in the beautiful chapel, and I would join them. I learned and gained much.

Advent is the beginning of the Church calendar. We begin our year at these weeks of anticipation of the celebration of the birth of Jesus, our attempt to bring ourselves close to the Incarnation, in which God, in His love, draws near to His creation in the form of a human in order to realize his love and redemption for a lost and broken world.

This is the last Sunday we will have with Luke in the way we have done for these last several weeks. We have lived with Luke's account of the words and actions of Jesus just before he turned his face to Jerusalem, and then as he was on his journey there, then as he spent the final week of his life there. Next week we will turn our attention to texts dealing

with the birth of Jesus. This morning we confront a text that contains a portion of the Passion, the account of Jesus death on the cross. I checked the lectionary cycle that I have access to and most years do not end with a text dealing with the crucifixion. So we are at an unusual and interesting point. We read and reflect upon the death of Jesus the week before we begin our celebration of the birth of Jesus and the Incarnation of God's will and love for His creation.

THE TEXT

1. Luke's account of this portion of the passion narrative is based on that found in Mark, as is Matthew's, with some interesting differences. Luke notes that there are onlookers to the crucifixion of Jesus, one presumes, ordinary citizens or perhaps those who were affected by Jesus, heard about him, or followed him. As opposed to the passion account in Matthew and Mark, Luke does not explicitly comment on these passersby and onlookers deriding Jesus or mocking him. They are just noted as onlookers, witnesses to what is taking place. Luke does note that the rulers scoff and deride Jesus. The sentence begins, "But the rulers scoffed..." as opposed, one would assume, to the onlookers who simply witnessed what was taking place. One of the themes suggested in this snippet of our text is Luke's insistence on the enmity of the leaders of the Jewish community against Jesus.
2. In all the synoptic accounts Jesus is offered something to drink. In Mark, when Jesus cries out to God, one of the bystanders runs to fill a sponge with vinegar and bring it

to Jesus. It seems to be an act of comfort. In Matthew he is offered wine mingled with gall to drink. Again, the impression is that it is done to comfort Jesus. In Luke, the offer of the drink is combined in the sentence with how the soldiers mocked him and offered him the vinegar to drink. So we are not sure whether the drink is offered out of simple human compassion or out of a cruel spirit. Obviously, Luke meant us to understand that it comes out of a cruel intention.

3. The most important difference, and the center of our text this morning, is Luke's addition to the account of those who are crucified with Jesus. In each of the synoptic accounts it is reported that two others are crucified with Jesus. They are identified as robbers in Mark and Matthew, as criminals in Luke. We can assume, I guess, that they were Jews. Mark and Matthew report that even the robbers who are crucified with Jesus, mock and deride him. We are given the picture of the Son of Man, who brought the word of the Kingdom, who manifested the benefits of the Kingdom in healings and altering of lives, is derided and mocked even by those who had been found guilty of crimes. A picture of his abandonment is made complete where even those who lived lives of crime found their superiority to him and mocked. In Luke, however, while one of the criminals is drawn from the Mark account and derides Jesus, the other is reported to acknowledge his own sin and the justice of his crucifixion, but witnesses that Jesus has done nothing wrong. He then requests of Jesus that Jesus remember him when He comes into his kingdom. To which Jesus makes a unique promise; "This day you shall be with me in Paradise."

What Luke does with this addition to the passion narrative, is to bring into the account a perspective which represents what is held to be the case long after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension; that while he is on the cross he is still the Lord of Paradise, one who is the Lord of a Kingdom. The presence of this balm to soften what is being described is not a part of the Mark or Matthew narrative. Especially in Mark, what we have is an account of Jesus being abandoned, rejected and in solitude, dying a death of suffering. In Luke it is softened. The singular addition he makes to the account is one which blunts what it is that takes place by means of what has come to be revealed after the stark, unjust and terrible death of Jesus.

11. Cursed is he who hangs on the Tree.

1. The title for the sermon this morning is from Deuteronomy. Among the laws in Deuteronomy is one that says that if a man does a crime that requires the death penalty, and he is hung on a tree, that he should be buried on the same day, for a person left to hang on the tree is cursed by God, and the land will be cursed by God.

This saying is to help us understand the nuances of the cross. We see that the issue is not just death, but it is a death shadowed by the curse of God upon those who hang upon a tree. So Jesus death, was a handing over to others to have control over him, that his death leaves him subject to the curse of God in the view of the tradition of Israel. If you just squeeze your eyes, Jesus on the cross turns from the son of God realizing the redemptive plan of God to a man cursed of God because left to hang upon the tree.

There are examples of the humiliation that can be brought upon us justly or unjustly, and sometimes they are more than we can bear. There is a teacher from Howard County who has fled and not been seen, because he has been accused of sexually abusing a young person entrusted to his care. He had a good and responsible job, he was well known and admired in the community. But he did things that brought shame upon him and he fled and hasn't been seen or heard from since the beginning of the summer.

I remember the words of Rudy Gulliani in his first press conference after the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. He was asked by a reporter about the number of victims. He said there has been no attempt to estimate the number of people who were lost. When the number is known, it will be more than any of us can bear.

There are just things we believe it is difficult to bear. And as we all know, our destiny of death, is difficult to bear. The loss of children is difficult to bear, may be unbearable. I don't know about you, but sometimes, in solitude, in the dark, the unbearable comes to me by act of imagination and anticipation.

Paradoxically, we are confronted with the abyss of the unbearable sometimes fast on the heels of profound joy, when there are those blissful, joyful moments of communion with those we love the most. It is not far from that experience to the awareness how fragile their lives are and how this vast, cold universe could engulf them in a simple turn. When

we love them our imagination can cough up this fragility in a moment and we are confronted with the unbearable.

2. There is a truth which we often don't think about or even realize. We almost never experience things directly. When something comes into our life we have images, ideas, understandings, stories by means of which what we experience is ordered and interpreted. That is the way I think about this report of Luke regarding his account of the passion of Jesus. He uses what only could come later, after the resurrection and the blooming of the faith of the church. He brings back to his narrative of what happened to Jesus what has come to be believed about it. How singularly this is the case can be seen by the fact that the criminal who is crucified with Jesus who defends him, holds a faith at this time in the unfolding of the story that none of the most intimate followers of Jesus held. They all fled under the ringing of the Deuteronomy text that those who hang on the tree are cursed by God. So Luke says to us, look, but do not be alarmed. The death and humiliation of Jesus has far on the other side of it, resurrection, glorification and rule in a new kingdom. And in so far as this is true about Jesus, and for the criminal who dies justly, so it is for us as well.

3. Each encounter with reality, while framed in the language and ideas that we are familiar and comfortable with, can also as well, be processed by means of our reflection and thinking. When there is a death of one close to us, we use the old language and ideas that we have inherited that is aimed to take the sting what we experience. But we still experience what we experience. If it is loss, we still

experience loss. It is grief, no matter what ideas we bring to it, it is still grief. And then when we live the loss and the grief, we can, by means of confronting it, reflect on what has happened, think about what has actually happened to us, find a way to give expression to it, we find a new thing coming to be out of experiencing what is unbearable; a life beyond what can't be born, a new life that has been stripped of what made up the only life we have known.

CONCLUSION

What our faith points to is far beyond the language and ideas we associate with that faith. Often, the language and ideas of our faith encourage us to not face what is necessarily encountered in life. The language of our faith, the ideas of our faith, do not protect us from sometimes having to succumb to what it is that we must, by just living, have to encounter. The language and ideas fall away as frail defense against what is large and present in life to be born. When we try to make the language and ideas of faith be real instead of what we must experience, then faith ceases to be faith in the midst of life and becomes something else that denies life. But what is true is that it is that in the bearing of the unbearable, the encountering of that which cannot be faced, does there flow to us what our faith so weakly tries to express. That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself; that God is in the stark real things of life and he is in them in such a way that we are healed, renewed, reconciled and redeemed.

Amen.