

Sermon Last Sunday of the Church Year C [Proper 29] @ St Johns – 20/11/16
“Jesus, remember me.” (Luke 23:33-43)

Text... Pray: Father, bless and open our hearts by your Spirit to your Word for us, in JC, Amen.

One of the privileges of ministry is to care for people in their dying days. I recently visited an elderly lady who is unknown to St Johns, and I quickly discovered that she was desperately lonely. She visibly brightened when she heard that I was a pastor from the Lutheran Church. All she wanted was someone to talk to and to simply read some Scripture to her. So I did. At one point, unannounced, she then tried singing ‘The Lord is my Shepherd,’ but in that moment she simply couldn’t remember the words or the tune... so I started singing the first verse for her. Because she hadn’t heard it sung for many years, she burst into tears.

This lady didn’t really want much from me. She just wanted to know that Jesus was with her in what may be her last days on earth. The lonely nights in hospital gave her plenty of time to think... but because of her pain her thoughts became dark making her doubt her faith in the Lord. She knew that her body is slowly giving up but that’s not what disturbed her the most. It was the fact that death was approaching faster than ever before, and the evil one was mocking her for her trust in Jesus, for she had wandered from Him since coming to be over here near family.

Just as many do in their last days, she wanted the assurance that only God can give through His life-giving Word. She wanted it spoken through God’s people. Her faith, wherever it had wandered, wanted the simple pure Word from God, not mixed up with anything else I felt I had to say. In her time of need, the only thing that could give her comfort against her doubts and her troubled heart was the presence of God’s promise-filled Words being shared with her. Through them, the Lord gave her the peace she needed, particularly, that He had not forgotten her... isn’t that something we can all do as God’s people?

Often when we face personal trials, our faith is mocked by our troubles, or by those around us. But most of all our faith is mocked by the evil one who wants us to give up trusting Jesus. And, when the time draws near we will also be mocked by death itself. Even the strongest Christians struggle with death’s mockery, and the ridicule of the grave testing our trust in God’s salvation.

Today we hear Luke’s version of the crucifixion. We know the happy ending of the story: God’s promises will be fulfilled on that Day of final resurrection. One day, Jesus will come back for us. On the Last Day, one moment we’ll be here, and the next we’ll see Jesus in all His glory. On Judgment Day, those who have believed in Jesus as Saviour will be raised to enter into the glory of eternal life.

In the meantime, we face ridicule. The joy-filled ending is made fun of. *“How can you believe that Jesus is God, and that He’s coming back? He’s been gone so long – did He really rise from death, or is He still dead? Perhaps he’s just dead! Perhaps He’s forgotten you? You know, this life is all there is, and you’ve gotta get the most outta life now ‘cause, well, that’s all there is.”*

And death also tries to make a mockery of our faith. The body stops breathing; the heart stops beating. Death mocks us as it comes: *“I’m it. I’m all you have to look forward to. I’ll swallow you and take you away from everything you love and want and hope for. Jesus can’t do anything about it. I will claim everyone sooner or later. Believe the facts, not that stuff about Jesus.”* And, as we have seen death approach our loved ones, it has mocked and tested our faith in Christ as well.

Jesus also was mocked... Let’s look more closely at the scene of mockery in Luke 23. The soldiers gathered around the cross don’t care what’s happening to Jesus. They simply have a job to do, and they do it, efficiently nailing Him without any compassion to the wood and lifting Him up in place. Their gambling under the cross diverts their attention from the horror and shows they don’t think much of Him. Jesus is just another criminal to crucify. And yet, they also mock Jesus. The soldiers have fun at His expense. They ridicule Him as the King of Jews who can’t even save Himself. Their laughter, contempt, and perhaps their crude joking provides great irony: Jesus hangs naked and open to their mockery... but by not saving Himself He is saving them, for they are included in His prayer, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Lk. 23:34).

The Jewish leaders are also there looking on... Unbelieving, bitter, self-righteous and confident, their fear is turned into boldness. This ‘King’ isn’t so dangerous anymore. They see Jesus now as weak and pathetic, a fraud who claimed to be the Christ. Their mocking is the same as the soldiers, an ironic denial of Christ as the Chosen One of God because He doesn’t show them any sign of His power to simply save Himself. They look smugly upon Jesus in their hatred and their open rejection of Him as the Christ, but they won’t find relief from their fears until He is dead, for they still lurk under the surface. They’ve heard, and some have even seen Jesus’ miracles. If He were suddenly to break free through His power, *no amount* of Roman military might could save them...

“This is the king of the Jews” (v.38) reads the notice above Jesus’ head. It is Pilate’s way of mocking both the Jewish leaders as well as Jesus. These words ridicule Him for being the King who couldn’t save Himself as well. But again in clear irony, this time, for *all to see*, they actually declare what *is true*. Jesus *is* the King of the Jews, and of all people.

Then there are the two criminals hanging alongside Him. One speaks against Jesus, and we hear the contempt in his voice. He is defiant, angry even and sarcastic as he joins in with the mocking. Fearful of death's nearness he throws his low-blows in with everyone else, "*Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" (v.39).

Although the other criminal hanging there is somehow already beaten and broken. He is defeated by his crimes and his sentence. He sees himself as the lost and condemned man he truly is. Honestly accepting his guilt leaves him with only one hope as death draws near. He turns to Jesus. Somehow he sees more than a dying man, more than the blood and agony. Many see a failed and fallen leader, but he sees the Messiah. How difficult it would have been for that criminal. His own life is a failure on this earth. He is humiliated and tormented – but he deserves it; he is getting punished justly as he deserves... but the One hanging next to him is innocent – He has done nothing wrong, and yet, here He is: ridiculed, punished, and dying. ...In an act of faith, the criminal places himself into the outstretched arms of the Christ. He recognises Jesus as the One who alone can save his soul from death. He confesses something profound – that Jesus is the King, who has a kingdom he wants to live in. "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*" (v.42). Through a simple act of trust, he receives more than he could have ever imagined.

Against all hope, the sudden reversal... is that *Jesus answers* his request! A criminal, stuck on his own cross, unable even to be baptised, and in his last moments, receives the promise of paradise! When Jesus declares it *so, it IS... this* criminal receives God's kingdom! ...The reversal in our story is, so may we. In the process, Jesus turns the mockery of the sign above His head into a sign announcing the truth for all to see... and for all to believe. Graciously, and undeserving, the criminal's request is granted: "*...Today you will be with me in Paradise*" (v.43).

A blessed ending amid the suffering and pain, is now *assured* by Christ Himself. The mockery can't take Jesus' words away. Death is swallowed up in this gift of paradise given to one who, by human terms, is unworthy. On the cross, the criminal sees the sign, "*This is the King of the Jews*" (v.38), and believes. The One who doesn't save Himself saves others by His death. It's not that Jesus couldn't save Himself as people claimed, but that He wouldn't. He needed to take our punishment on the cross, so that on the Last Day we would be judged innocent, free to enter into His presence, forever. The sign above Jesus' head now is reversed – it is fulfilled! It is not ridicule, but the truth of the situation for all the world to see. Jesus *is* the King who saves us!

Three days later, the women who wept and watched Jesus die are the first ones to see Him turn the tables and mock death in return. The grave is empty. It could not hold Jesus. And even though death comes for us all, it will not have the final word

on our lives. Jesus destroys the power of death's hold over us. Death is swallowed up in victory, and because His body rose from death, so will ours on the Last Day. The Christ silences those who make fun of Him. All mockery of the King of all Kings will die away and never again be heard. For Jesus lives, and His words and deeds for the sake of all humankind will never fade away.

And so we look forward to that Day when He silences all mockery with our final resurrection from the dead. For Jesus mercifully answers us in the same way He did the un-named criminal...

When we are baptised, we graciously receive God's kingdom and pardon... When we confess our sins – when our defiance drops away and we admit, just like the criminal, that we are broken and helpless, and that deep down we want to be saved... we graciously receive God's kingdom and pardon. When we kneel before God and take the wafer and wine: *"Take, and eat...; Take, and drink; this is the body... this is the blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."* ...we graciously receive God's words of paradise, given from Jesus Himself.

So, even as we taste the mockery of death, even as we know we are undeserving, we also know the blessing that Jesus declares over us. Our King promises that we will live in His eternal kingdom of joy and peace. Until then, even in our weakest moments, let us keep on praying in faith, just as the criminal, *"Lord Jesus, remember me..."* Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.