

He Who Set Aside His Divinity

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

These, are the busiest of times in the Church year. We've been gathering together for "extra" services for nearly two months now. This week will only serve to accelerate matters as God's people congregate daily here in His house, God willing, without exception. Sunday's introduction of this Holiest of Weeks was poignant and remarkable. Yesterday, for the first time at least in recent memory, we received the gift of His Word in the Office of Evening Prayer on the Monday of Holy Week.

Today, we assemble again; not on a Sunday as one certainly would expect, and not in the middle of the week as has been our custom for 40 days, and no, not even as part of the Triduum that will begin in about 48 hours. This day is Holy Tuesday; a Tuesday that doesn't have a clever or memorable nickname. It's not Maundy like Thursday, or "Spy" like Wednesday. It's not Ash or Palmerum. And no, it's most certainly not Fat.

But like Saturday, it's Holy – and that is not a bad thing.

This day has been observed as the day on which Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees and Sadducees over issues of His authority and paying taxes to Caesar; the day on which Jesus commented on the widow's donation, spoke the woes against the Pharisees and delivered the Olivet discourse. It is also observed as one of the times when He predicted His own death.

We've been preparing ourselves for that day. Over the course of the last several weeks that message has been delivered to you from this pulpit;

the message of the shedding of His blood. His is the blood that gives access for all to the good and precious gifts of the Father. His is the blood that is shared among His people across time and space. His is the blood that, like His Word, bespeaks us righteous. His, not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain, is the blood that sanctifies. And His is the blood that pardons us of our sin out of pure mercy and love.

Tonight we heard from the gospel of Mark how this plays out. To be sure, our third reading was a thorough, if not exhaustive, and (because of its wordiness) almost un-Markian account of the passion of the Christ. Not surprisingly, there are a few details found here that are unique among the gospels. Among them is the description of the soldiers' mockery of Jesus. Hear again the words of the Gospel writer:

The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him. After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.¹

Before we look more closely at tonight's reading, let us first consider how we even begin to rightly meditate on what it meant for the Son of Man to set aside His divinity and to assume His humanity. When we hear the account of His brutal treatment, we often have an emotional reaction to it like we would with any similar story. We find ourselves feeling sorry for the victim who was undeserving of such cruelty. We find ourselves getting

¹ Mark 15:17-20.

angry at the antagonists who were so inexplicably vicious. And maybe, we find ourselves feeling guilty that He suffered such things that we don't have to endure.

Are these appropriate responses? Sadness, anger and guilt?

In order to begin to answer this question, let us first consider the reason for His suffering. Make no mistake – there is more going on here than the ridicule of some Roman miscreants. Jesus stricken, smitten and afflicted is not the result of vengeful, misguided Jews. Christ's passion is the ultimate ramification of the wrath of God. For starters then, an appropriate response would be one of utter and complete terror.

The wages of sin isn't sadness, anger or guilt – but rather, it is death. God does not, will not, cannot look the other way. His way is unchanging and so is the way which God looks upon sin and sinners. Luther wrote that the Father despises sin “so much so that he was unwilling to release sinners even for His only and dearest son without His payment of the severest penalty for them.”² The willingness of our Heavenly Father to give His son as a sacrifice is the most humbling example of His love for you. It is at the same time the most profound example of His hatred of sin.

Not only is it by God's grace that we are spared from His wrath, it is also only by His grace that we can rightly meditate on Christ's passion. To humanly dwell on His suffering, to consider His mockery, to feel sad, mad or guilty is at best incomplete. But to see through the eyes of **faith** the good and gracious will of God, and to hear by His Faith the Gospel and the

² Martin Luther's *A Meditation on Christ's Passion*.

benefits of His sacrificial blood-bought forgiveness, and in The Faith to live a life with a conscience free of the guilt of sin is to revel in the benefits of His suffering.

Let us then by faith look at the focus of tonight's account – the mockery of the soldiers.

They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.³

This Italian cohort, probably about 600 men, sought to torture, abuse and injure Jesus. But just as significantly they set out to scorn, ridicule and taunt Him. His weren't limited to physical miseries. Scripture notes not just the crowning, spitting and striking, but also the stripping, the kneeling and the mocking.

This particular pericope is silent on our Savior's response to these evil attacks, and that is significant. It's certainly more than ironic that the Word was silent, that the Judge was being judged. Here you are free to see glimpses of the Great Reversal. The One who gives us our cloak of righteousness that hides our sin was Himself exposed and stripped of His clothing. The One who cures the blind in love with spittle has His own face covered with spit by those who hate Him.⁴

³ Mark 15:17-19.

⁴ Cyprian of Carthage's *The Paradox of His Being "Led Out."*

Of course the greater irony is yet to come. Little did those soldiers know what was being foretold as they saluted and knelt before this crowned King of the Jews.

And crown Him they did, with a perverse and brutal crown of thorns, which may have been as much as a foot long. In this simple act, the soldiers unwittingly reveal both the judgement and the grace shown in the work of the cross. If God demanded a bloody sacrifice, and that is exactly what was necessary, that's what He was going to get. These thorns are themselves both a reminder and consequence of sin, for they are the "fruit" of the fall and the cursing of the ground. At the same time, these thorns also harken back to the thorn-bush that would not be consumed by fire and was therefore a symbol of God's continual grace – grace alone.

Of course, harkening back to Genesis and Exodus is altogether fitting when one considers the atoning work of Christ. As Paul explains to the Romans,

*"Therefore, just as one trespass brought condemnation for all men, so also one act of righteousness brought justification and life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."*⁵

This is how we are dead in Adam and alive in Christ. Our high priest has made himself the final sacrifice; the gentle lamb led to the slaughter.

Recall some of the text from tonight's office hymn:⁶

Come, see these things and ponder,

⁵ Romans 5:18.

⁶ Lutheran Service Book, "Upon the Cross Extended," verse 2, p 453.

Your soul will fill with wonder
As blood streams from each pore.
Through grief beyond all knowing,
From His great heart came flowing
Sighs welling from its deepest core.

Your soul in griefs unbounded,
Your head with thorns surrounded,
You died to ransom me.
The cross for me enduring,
The crown for me securing,
You healed my wounds and set me free.

The removal of sin is said to be the Power and the Fruit of His suffering.⁷ How unexpected it is then as we reflect on the sardonic mockery by the soldiers.

They began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.⁸

Is power seen in His silence? Can good fruit be produced from a reeds, thorns and spit? Is this how we obtain the pardon of our sin? Thanks be to God the answers are yes, yes and yes – make no mistake about it, this is precisely how He wins His kingdom.

He is the King that man neither envisioned ... nor deserved. Such are the ways of Jesus – who is born lowly in a manger, who eats with sinners and washes their feet, touches the dead and leprous and rides majestically on a donkey. Ours is a King who accepts the crown of thorns and reed

⁷ Martin Luther's *A Meditation on Christ's Passion*.

⁸ *Mark 15:18-19a*.

scepter, endures the jeers and blows, and bears our sins and His own cross to the hill. The Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, for you!⁹

Then begins His unanticipated and glorious exaltation. First in the atoning work of His death, then in His victorious resurrection and finally in His triumphant return. This is the King of the Jews, the soldiers bowed down to Him once and will do so again when He is revealed as the Lord of All. At which time *every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*¹⁰ Amen.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday of Holy Week

Mark 15:16-20; Psalm 54:1-7; Jeremiah 11:18-20; 1 Timothy 6:12-14

The passion narrative from Mark's Gospel, Mark 14"1-15"46

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Soli Deo Gloria

⁹ *Lutheran Service Book*, "The Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth," p. 438.

¹⁰ *Philippians 2:10*.