

Cross Purposes

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Today, Passion Sunday, we observe the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus for the sins of the world. To be sure, our Lord's passion and death are mysteries we observe every Sunday since they together with his resurrection are the cornerstones of our faith; but today in particular we focus on the events immediately related to the cross itself. We meditate upon our Lord's trial, his rejection by the people, the abuse he suffered at the hands of the soldiers, the horrors of his crucifixion, and his subsequent death and burial. We take all this in and ponder it deep in our hearts.

To help move us in that direction, let's begin with a question about what happened on that first Good Friday. Considering it all, let me ask you this: was it by far the most evil and horrendous crime ever wrought by the hands of wicked men in their rebellion against God, or was it the kindest, most loving and compassionate act ever performed by our gracious God for the benefit of sinful mankind? Which do you think? ... It's not possible to choose, is it? The seemingly impossible answer is that it's both. Man's greatest sin is at the same time God's greatest display of love. Though the motives of God and man were exactly opposite – or as we might say it, though God and man were at *cross purposes* – they ended up accomplishing precisely the same result: the Lord Jesus hanging dead on a cross.

Astounding, isn't it? What we are dealing with here is called a *paradox*: a person, situation, or action that is essentially self-contradictory – and yet is completely true. It defies human reason; but that's what the cross of Jesus is. It's the supreme example of how the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men that the Lord could use man's worst folly and turn it around for the good of lost mankind. It's just as the patriarch Joseph told his brothers who had hated him and sold him into slavery: "You meant it for evil; but God meant it for good – to do what is now being accomplished: the saving of many lives."

The chief paradox before us, then, is the cross; but in Luke's account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, we find other intriguing apparent contradictions in which you have people thinking or doing one thing in the hope of accomplishing their goal, and the Lord turning it around to accomplish his cross purpose by it.

Take, for example, who it is that condemns Jesus. It's the religious leaders – the very ones whose calling it is to keep the hope of the one true faith alive in the hearts of God's people. They know the prophecies about the promised Messiah like no one else. They look forward to his coming with eager expectation. They lead the people in the rituals that foreshadow and point to the Messiah's mission and work. And yet, when Christ comes and stands before them, having fulfilled all the prophecies and doing mighty miracles that only God can do, they don't recognize him. Instead, they who are supposedly the moral pillars of society, who denounce sin in every form, concoct charges they know to be false in order to have Jesus condemned in a Roman court of law. They perjure themselves to accuse Jesus of every crime in the book. And they entice the crowd whom they are supposed to be leading to the Messiah to call for his death.

Compounding the irony is that it's an idolatrous pagan, Pontius Pilate, who declares Jesus to be innocent. He does it repeatedly. And he's not the only one. As the narrative

continues, two other witnesses will declare Jesus innocent: the criminal on the cross beside Jesus – a man being justly punished for his offenses – and another pagan, the Roman centurion overseeing the crucifixion. There's sweet irony here too: this criminal is likely a man who rebelled against the Roman occupation. He's a counterinsurgent, a terrorist who hates Romans and everything about them. And yet he and the Roman centurion charged with putting Jesus to death are in complete agreement that Jesus has done nothing wrong. Together with Pilate they are the three witnesses by which, according God's Word, a fact is established in a court of law.

So, on one hand we've got the religious leaders, the priests who offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, unwittingly performing their role by handing over Jesus to death; and on the other hand we've got secular authorities and mutual enemies alike declaring Jesus to be the perfect, sinless sacrifice. And there's more going on. We've got God's people rejecting Jesus, and it's Gentiles and sinners who see the truth about him – which points ahead to what's going to happen after the resurrection. For the most part God's own people will want nothing to do with Gospel. And it's their rejection of it – even their persecution of those who do believe it – that will cause the saving message of the crucified and risen Lord to be carried into the entire world. God will use the Jews' animosity of Jesus to grow his church and save many more than would have been saved otherwise.

This is underscored by Jesus' response to the women of Jerusalem who wept for him as he passed by on the way to Golgotha. Jesus told them, "You're crying for the wrong guy. Weep instead for yourselves and for your children." And if we're not careful, we can fall into this same trap as we meditate upon our Lord's passion. The temptation is to think about poor Jesus and all the things he so shamefully suffered as if I were only a sympathetic bystander bemoaning the injustice of it all. "Just look at what those bad people did to him. How terrible!" No. We need to see that it's our sins and our rejection of Jesus that put him on the cross. If we miss that, we will be destroyed just like the unbelieving Jews – but the Lord will still ensure that the true Gospel continues to be spread throughout the world.

Backing up a bit, there's another paradoxical aspect to the trial of Jesus. It happens when the crowd calls for the release of a felon named Barabbas. He's another terrorist, apparently one known by the people, which suggests that he was a leader of some kind in the movement. The Romans have him on rebellion and murder, which means that he probably killed a Roman soldier – and you know how the police feel about a cop killer. He's the last guy Pontius Pilate wants to release. What's interesting, though, is his name, which literally means "son of father". Men in that era were usually given a first name and then their surname would be "son of whatever their father's name was", as in Simon Bar-Jonah, which was Peter's name: Simon, son of Jonah. So, Barabbas' name practically screams, "Mom didn't know who my father was"; and that she didn't bother to give him a first name says she didn't care. Imagine walking around with a name that proclaims to all the world, "I'm a bastard, I don't know who my father is, and mom was a prostitute who didn't love me." That's what Barabbas was saddled with. Maybe that's part of what led him to a life a crime, even if it doesn't excuse it.

But now we go to Pilate – the man charged with upholding order and justice in society. He stands for the law. And yet, at the insistence of the crowd, even though he doesn't want to, in order to calm a rising riot, Pilate releases the guilty, nameless, unloved son of an unknown father and condemns to death the innocent, beloved, and only begotten Son of *the* Father, God most high. This is the great exchange. The thing to see is that Barabbas stands for all of us who are guilty before God, who have rebelled against him, and who are rightly called the

unloved children of the devil. And yet the Lord, in his love, condemns his beloved Son to die in our place so that we can go free.

The next set of cross purposes I'd like to point out takes place in the exchange between Jesus and the two criminals crucified with him. One of them cares only about the present. He's interested in saving his life in this world. Whatever hope he has in Jesus pertains to here and now. "Are you not the Christ?" he asks. "Then save yourself and us!" The paradox is that it is precisely the work of salvation that Jesus is accomplishing by *not* saving himself. The other criminal sees things differently. He understands that he is getting what he deserves in this life: death for his sins. He understands too that he's teetering on the brink of eternity, that he is about to face the Judge of all men who will decide his fate forever. It terrifies him because he knows that what he justly has to look forward to is an eternity of suffering that makes his present distress look like a picnic in the park. It's as he's faced with this that he is given to see what no one else can: that the beaten, bloody, gasping man next to him is exactly what the sign placed above his head mockingly proclaims: the King of the Jews. Convinced of his own guilt, his eyes are opened so that he can see the suffering of the innocent Lamb of God for what it is: the Christ of God entering into his glorious kingdom through his sacrificial suffering for lost mankind. He sees that Jesus is the Savior and King he needs. And to this hope he clings even as he dies: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." His plea for salvation is granted. To him Jesus promises life in paradise.

So, one criminal wanted temporal salvation, and lost; the other wanted eternal salvation and found it. One desired to be saved without his cross; the other saw his need to be saved through his cross. And not surprisingly, this same tension exists in the church today. There are many who look to Jesus only for what they think he can give them in this life – things like good health, success, happy relationships, and what not. And from time to time we all fall into this trap. As nice as those things are, that isn't what the ministry of Jesus is about. And the Lord now assigns us crosses to bear precisely to help us see what our real needs are. Therefore when we suffer various afflictions, we ought not to be turning to him and saying, "If you really are the Christ, save me from this trouble"; rather you should see that it's precisely your troubles that help you see the suffering and death of Jesus as God's solution to your biggest problem: your sin. And then you'll find in him the salvation you need.

And speaking of finding what you're looking for, we have another paradox in the brief account of Joseph of Arimathea. We're told that he was looking for the kingdom of God. Elsewhere in the Gospels we're informed that he was a secret follower of Jesus. He didn't make his views known publicly for fear of the vast majority of those on the council who were opposed to Jesus and wanted to destroy him. So, while Jesus lived, he was afraid to be associated with him. After he died, he didn't seem to mind so much. Apparently he felt that the worst he could be accused of is paying his last respects to misguided visionary – one who was no longer a threat to anyone because he was dead. So he went and asked Pilate for custody of Jesus' body. At least he would see that he got a proper burial.

The irony is that he was looking for the Kingdom of God. He thought that he'd found it in Jesus. It's only after he'd given up that hope that he really did find the Kingdom of God – in the crucified body of Jesus; it's just that he doesn't know it yet. You see, as he lays Jesus to rest, he is in fact planting the seed that would grow into the Tree of Life that would fill the whole earth. For what is the Christian church, the Kingdom of God, if not the very body of Christ? It's just as Jesus said, "Unless a seed goes into the earth and dies, it remains but a single seed; but if it dies and is planted it becomes many." Though Joseph does not yet know it, he becomes the planter of that seed. He thinks he's taking custody of the corpse of a failed prophet. He does

not yet know that the ministry of Jesus has indeed been a great success – and that in the crucified body of Jesus he has found exactly what he was looking for: the very foundation of God’s kingdom. I’d say that’s quite a paradox.

There are several others in today’s Gospel lesson that I could point out; but for now just one more. It occurs in the very last line. There are a number of women who have accompanied Jesus and the disciples from Galilee. They were present at Golgotha all day long to witness the Lord’s crucifixion. They saw him die. They later stood at a distance and watched while he was hastily buried in Joseph’s newly carved tomb. Afterward they went home to prepare embalming spices. It was their intent to return on Sunday to finish properly the job Joseph had performed in such a hurry. And then the text says, “On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.”

Really? I wonder what kind of rest they enjoyed that day. Sure, they didn’t go out to work or perform any physical labor at home; but do you imagine that they were able to rest after all they had seen and heard? Their hearts were broken. Their hopes and dreams were crushed – not to mention the sheer horror of what they’d witnessed. They were traumatized. They may have obeyed the letter of the law not to work; but in their spirits there was anything but rest. All was turmoil and confusion and despair. It reminds me of what the Jews had made of the Sabbath command. The Lord had directed his people to rest. The Lord was saying to them, “You take it easy today. I’ll take of you. Just trust me.” But they didn’t do that. They turned the command to rest into a burden – a long list of rules about what you could and couldn’t do. So you had to go through the day on pins and needles for fear that you might break one of the thousands of little ordinances the rabbis had come up with. Instead of being a day of rest, the Sabbath became a pain in the neck – a day of fear that if you didn’t do things just right, the Lord would be angry with you. They rested according to the letter of the law; but not according to its spirit.

But now look what’s going on: the Lord God, who rested on the seventh day after his work of creation, now rests the seventh day in the tomb. His great work of saving the world from sin is complete. “It is finished.” And if any of the disciples or women had understood that – if they had believed what Jesus had been telling them all along, that he had to suffer, die, and on the third day rise again – they too could have enjoyed perfect rest that Sabbath Day. They remained in distress, though, because they didn’t believe.

And the same is true of us. When we believe and trust in Jesus’ accomplished work of salvation on the cross, we have perfect rest in him. But when we doubt, when we believe that our salvation is in any way dependent upon something we do or don’t do, there can be no rest. Nor can there be any real keeping of the law of God; only the outward appearance of it.

In summary, then, what I’ve tried to show you this morning is how in many ways we humans are at cross purposes with God and his great plan for us in Christ. And how, despite it all, God still accomplishes his gracious purposes for us in and through the cross of Jesus. It is truly amazing. The foolishness of God is wiser than any wisdom of men. Let us therefore acknowledge the paradoxical way in which the Lord works so that in the midst of things we do not understand, we may trust all the more firmly in Jesus Christ our Lord, our Savior, and our King. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!