

The End

In the name of our King, dear friends in Christ: So, we've come to end – the end of another church year, alternately called the Last Sunday, the Sunday of Fulfillment, or the Sunday of Christ the King. No matter what we call it, the theme is the same: it's triumph. It's celebration. It's the victory achieved. It's Christ our Lord enthroned in heavenly splendor surrounded by throngs of the saints he brought through to his eternal kingdom, who are waving palm branches and praising him with loud voices for the salvation he purchased for them with his own blood. It is the happiest of all happy endings.

So it seems strange indeed that today's Gospel doesn't take us to that glorious, happy ending. No. Instead, in a passage that seems better suited to Good Friday, we're taken back to a different end – an end in which Jesus, bloody, beaten, naked, is being tortured to death in abject humiliation, surrounded by weeping women, scoffing religious leaders, and mocking soldiers. Instead of glory, there is shame. Instead of praise, there is derision. Instead of waving palm branches, there are shaking fists and wagging heads. Instead of life, there is death. It's a decidedly unhappy ending.

And it's not the only one. As Jesus is facing this most unhappy ending, he speaks of one that will be far worse. Turning to the crowd of mourners trailing him, he says, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children." Then he tells them why. There's an end coming upon you, an end so awful, so filled with terror, that what should be a woman's greatest joy – the maternal thrill of bringing another life into this world and nourishing it – will be considered a curse. They will consider blessed instead those women who don't have to bear the burden of seeing the children they gave birth to wallowing in misery and doomed to destruction. *That's* how bad the end will be. And in their attempts to escape it – to flee from the wrath to be revealed – they will call upon mountains and hills to bury them alive and crush them beneath tons of stone and soil—that being far preferable than exposure to the coming judgment; but unfortunately for them, just as unlikely. There will be no place to hide. All will be laid bare.

"For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" It's Jesus' poetic way of saying, "Look at me. If this is what happens to One who is righteous and bearing fruit for the Lord, what will happen to you who are evil and dead in your sins?"

In the immediate context, Jesus is prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, which was fulfilled in AD 70. Then, to make an example to other conquered nations, the Romans laid waste to the habitually rebellious Jewish capital – wiping it and its citizens completely off the map. Because they did not know the day of their visitation and recognize Jesus as the Lord's Anointed, their house was made desolate and their nation brought to a calamitous end. That nation is gone, never to rise again.

In a broader sense, however, the destruction of Jerusalem and its inhabitants is a prophetic foreshadowing of a still greater end to come; namely the judgment of God against the whole world and all who refuse to recognize Jesus as the Lord's Anointed and their King. At that time all the earth will be laid bare. The elements will melt in the heat of God's wrath. And all people, the living and the newly raised dead, will stand before the Lord in the judgment. He will separate them into two groups, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. He'll place

his sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left, and he will pronounce upon them two completely different ends.

These ends we see prophetically foreshadowed in the two criminals crucified with Jesus. And what we want to do is see them as representatives of all mankind. For all are evil doers. All justly deserve death. All are under the same curse and condemnation. And all will come at some point to the end of this life.

One criminal (we may presume the one on the left) rails against Jesus. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" These are not words spoken in faith or hope, but in bitter sarcasm. To be sure, the word translated "rails" is better rendered *blasphemes*. This is a man who's lived an indecent life, taking whatever he can from whomever he can. He's proud, arrogant, and without regret for the things he's done. His only regret is that he got caught. But even in his dying agony, he seeks to find pleasure in heaping scorn and inflicting injury on someone else. Such is his need to feel superior, to convince himself that at least he's better than the ridiculous, failed would-be prophet dying next to him. Thus he intends in a small way to *justify himself*. In this he stands for all who can't see the Savior for who he is because they refuse to recognize their need for Him.

The other criminal, the one on the right, sees Jesus in an entirely different light; but why? What's different about him? He tells us when rebuking his companion in crime. "Don't you fear God?" he asks with incredulity. This, the fear of the Lord, is the beginning of wisdom. That's what makes him different. He understands that after his life ends in a matter of hours on the other side awaits a far greater judgment than the one imposed on him by Roman authorities. He's not so much afraid of those who are in the process of destroying his body. He fears the One who can cast him body and soul into hell. And after the life he's led, he knows that can be the only end he deserves.

And yet ... and yet he has been given hope from an unexpected source: a man condemned just like him – and yet, a man *not* like him. No, this is a man who has shown no concern for himself at all. He's only been looking out for the good of others. He hasn't returned insults to those reviling him. He's not shouting curses. No, he's been praying for their forgiveness. This is a man like no other he has ever known.

Specifically where his hope comes from, it's hard to say. We know that faith comes from hearing the Word of God. Maybe he's had some exposure to Jesus prior to this. Perhaps he's heard him preach. Or maybe he was one who, several years earlier, had gone to hear John the Baptizer. Perhaps he had been one of the many who, confessing their sins, were washed by John in the Jordan and who were told to look for the One who would baptize with the Spirit and establish the kingdom of God. Who knows? Maybe he was on hand the day that John pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Or maybe it was something else: memories of attending synagogue in his youth, the reading of the Scriptures, those difficult passages concerning the suffering of God's servant, which never made sense to him before:

*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces*

*he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.*

Maybe it was a combination of several such factors; but one thing is clear, through what he remembered from the Scriptures, through what he heard others proclaim, and through Jesus' own Words the Holy Spirit has been at work to reveal to him a truth that no one – *no one* else can see: that the man suffering and dying next to him *is* the Christ of God; that he is, as the placard above his head states, the King of the Jews; and that despite the taunts of the religious leaders, the soldiers, and even his companion opposite him, who all call upon him to prove his claim by saving himself, that Jesus *will not* save himself precisely because he *is* who he claims to be – precisely because he is by his suffering and death saving those who trust in him.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

By God's grace, the guy gets it. He sees the triumph and glory of the cross. And in this way, I suppose we could say that he is (in a certain sense) the very first Christian (certainly the first Lutheran). And when they break his legs and he breathes his last he'll be the last one – at least for a few days.

This man, with his faith in Jesus, represents all who, like you, fear God's righteous judgment, confess their sins, and hold fast in trust and hope to the Savior who gave his life for

sinner upon the cross. And whether it be when you come to the end of this life or when all of us together come to the end of this age, Jesus' words to this dying thief are also sweet comfort and assurance to you: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." God grant to us all such a blessed and happy end. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!