

### **Word of Assurance**

Last week, on Ash Wednesday, we stood together before the cross of Jesus to behold his suffering—the suffering that *we* inflicted upon him by our sin. And because he bore *our* sin, we saw that we are every bit as guilty as those physically present who falsely accused him, beat him, nailed him to the cross, and stood laughing and mocking him in his misery. We saw that we need to see our own faces in that jeering crowd. For when we do, we can begin to understand the grace and love of our Savior when in the midst of untold anguish, we hear him pray for us, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*”

This evening, we return again to the abandoned stone quarry outside the western wall of Jerusalem called “Golgotha”, that is, the “Place of the Skull”. It is so named because behind the crosses, in the sheer rock cliff from which stone was once cut and removed, there is a formation that looks unmistakably like the face of a human skull. There’s a domelike crown, a depression for a nose, the top half of a mouth ... a few craggy, broken teeth frozen in a sinister grin ... and a pair of dark cavities that resemble empty eye sockets. Their blank stare seems transfixed upon the grim proceedings in the foreground as if watching with great interest the three men suspended there struggling for their last breaths of life. It is as if death itself were an eager spectator, hungrily awaiting its next three victims.

Tonight, we shift our focus from the man on the center cross to consider briefly the man crucified on his right. Who is he? In truth we aren’t told very much about him. One of the evangelists calls him a thief, another refers to him with a word that we might translate in several ways: a bandit, a criminal, perhaps (most likely) he is one of the armed zealots ... one of those violently opposed to Roman rule, who has become involved in a low-level guerrilla war for independence. They strike out against weak, unsuspecting targets like lone, off-duty soldiers, or fellow Jews whom they accuse of collaborating with the Romans. Today we would use the term “terrorist” to describe them. (It seems that in Middle Eastern politics there really is nothing new under the sun.) Whatever he is or calls himself, he has been condemned to die for his crimes.

Most likely he is both a thief and a political terrorist because the two often went hand in hand. So, it is today when many ne’er-do-wells try to give their life of crime an air of respectability by claiming to be “freedom fighters”. They justify their thefts, extortions, and murders (often directed against their own people) as “necessary means to a greater end”. It’s probable that he is one of those who were arrested with Barabbas, the murderer who led some kind of short-lived uprising in the city, and who later was set free by Pilate at the insistence of the crowd. Assuming that’s the case, we might be able to draw a brief sketch of his personality and present frame of mind.

Outwardly he is defiant to the last. He claims not to recognize the authority of the court that has condemned him. In prison and at his trial he shouts slogans against Rome. As his list of crimes is read, and as the witnesses come forward, he justifies each criminal act as “regrettable but necessary”. He pretends to ignore the sentence when Pontius Pilate orders his death. He faces his upcoming crucifixion with a façade of indifference. He wants to show the Romans that he has no fear, and he hopes to be remembered by his comrades as a hero of some kind—one who didn’t give the enemy the satisfaction of seeing him beg for mercy. He expresses nothing but disdain for his sheep-like countrymen who passively permit the Romans to rule the land that God promised “to us—to us, the descendants of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! You're a bunch of cowards, the lot of you, not to take up arms with us. Instead you allow these pagan dogs to pollute with their presence our divine inheritance! Very well then, watch and see how a true Jewish patriot dies!"

And then there's this Jesus fellow. It's good that Barabbas was set free – he'll continue the cause; but it's a pity to have to die next to a man like this instead. Can you believe it? To have to die with a preacher and religious teacher! ... Just another one of those who are all talk and no action. ... Such great hopes had been hung on him. Some even thought he might be the great conquering Savior who would free this land ... but now we see what he really is: a dreamer. A pathetic, weak man who hid behind a message of love and peace as a way of avoiding having to do anything real and meaningful. He had heard how when Pilate asked, "Are you a king then?" he had responded, "My kingdom is not of this world." "Pft! ... A kingdom not of this world? Then what good is it? Wake up, Jesus! This is where we live and die, right here! The last thing we need is some "pie in the sky" nonsense about some never-never land that only serves as an excuse for not taking matters into our own hands now. Some Savior he turned out to be."

He hears the crowd mocking Jesus, "He saved others, but he cannot save himself." "Come down from there, Jesus, and then we will believe you!" Our proud thief, even in his own agony, chimes in and manages to spit out sarcastically, "Yes, save yourself—and save us too while you're at it." (Little does he know at this point, but it's precisely *to save him* that Jesus *does not* save himself.)

And that, anyway, is the face this man presents to the world ... but deep inside, in his hidden self, in a part of him that until recently he's managed to hide to a large degree even from himself, it's a different story. In there is real fear. In prison he was frightened. The soldiers were very rough with prisoners who were involved with killing one of their own. They joked about how much they'd enjoy watching him die. They taunted him by describing the horrors in detail. The nights before the trial were long and dark ... and so very lonely. His comrades in arms were gone—they'd abandoned him. His family dare not visit him in the prison for fear of being associated with his crimes. Not likely anyway ... his parents had disapproved of the "career path" he'd chosen. They'd warned him where it would end. ... And they were right. Now, even his leader, Barabbas, is gone.

In the trial, he thought that maybe some patriotic folks would step up to defend him ... lie for him, that is; but instead all he saw were the people he'd hurt come forward. He heard their stories, how the things he did had ruined their lives and caused so much suffering. He had imagined himself a freedom fighter ... but his own people were accusing him of being just another common thug. He hadn't helped them a bit. The sentence of the court was a forgone conclusion; but when the words were spoken, he could feel his very soul trembling.

He determined that he would not cry out when he was flagellated; that is, when they used the barbed, multi-strand whip to remove all the skin from his back, all of it from his neck to his ankles. But in truth, he held out only until the third blow. He didn't think it was possible for anything to hurt so much. He wished he could die on the spot, but somehow, he lived through it. Afterward he regained his composure, and he was proud of the way he only flinched a little when they nailed him to the transom—but again, he lost it completely when they lifted the transom into place. He couldn't breathe, and he could feel his arms pull out of the sockets in his shoulders, and how the weight of his body now pulled on the nails pinching the nerves in his wrists, sending white-hot searing pain up and down his extended arms. He was certain that he couldn't take much more of this. Surely, he thought, death would come

soon ... sweet, welcome death—but how wrong he was: this could take days ... and now time seemed to stand still.

And it's funny how your perspective of things changes when you're in pain and facing an interminable death ... how the things that really are important rise to the surface, and how all the lies with which we deceive ourselves, and the various masks and fig leaves we hide behind to conceal who we really are ... how they are all stripped away leaving your soul as naked and exposed as someone being crucified. Yes, death would come ... oh, how he begged it would come soon; but then what? He had not been a particularly religious man in his adult years, but he had been raised in the faith. He could remember hearing the stories of Moses and David and Abraham. As a teen, he remembered going several times with his father to the temple, bringing a sacrificial lamb; and how the priest collected the blood to place on the altar to atone for their sins. It had been a long time since he had done anything like that.

And he was aware that another trial was coming. He knew that he would soon stand before the Lord to account for his life. He could not shout slogans of injustice or illegitimacy there. In this court the judgments would be righteous and true. Before, when carrying on the fight and considering the possibility of being killed, he had convinced himself that God would see him as a champion of his people, a hero defending the Promised Land against invaders. But now in his mind's eye he saw again the faces of the people he'd hurt ... who accused him before Pilate, and he knew it wasn't so. And then other sins he'd done ... and yes, often *enjoyed*, came flooding into his mind. No, not a hero; not a champion of Israel ... and he knew it. Now with all the self-deception stripped away, he could see exactly what he was. And that's what was scared him so.

*"What have I done? O Lord God in heaven ... how stupid and wrong and evil I have been ... how I have turned away from you, how I've wasted my life. Lord, I deserve nothing from you! But Lord, I beg you, have mercy! I was so blind! Have mercy on me!"*

He was scarcely sure he heard the answer to his prayer: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" Who said that? Jesus? How could he be thinking of *them* at a time like this? How could he ask forgiveness for this ugly, hateful mob? What kind of man is he? He saw again the placard above his head: King of the Jews. What was it he had told Pilate? "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" And the crowd, several days ago when he came to Jerusalem: "*Hosanna! Save us now, Son of David! Save us!*" And what was it that he had heard that John the Baptizer had said of him: "*The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.*" The miracles ... the message of love and forgiveness ... in an instant, all the pieces came together. Suddenly this dying thief saw what no one else in the whole world could see. "*And if he's praying for them ... then maybe he'll pray also for me.*"

*"For the love of God, Jesus, if you've got the power to do it, save yourself and us!"* It was the thief on the other side of Jesus speaking. "*Leave him alone! Can't you see we don't deserve to be saved? Our crimes put us here. But he hasn't done anything wrong.*" But now I understand why he's here. "*Jesus, please remember me when you come into your kingdom.*"

Jesus turned to look at him. His eyes said it even before the words came, "*I tell you the truth, you will be with me today in Paradise.*"

The agony did not suddenly end. The pain continued just as bad as before, but in an instant, he was no longer afraid. A warm sensation of peace and assurance swept over him.

He was certain that what Jesus had just said was true—he didn't understand how he could be so sure, but he was. He knew he had been forgiven. And somehow knowing that made his cross easier to bear.

And though the ominously dark day dragged on for what seemed to be an eternity, he held tightly to the promise of the man dying next to him, whose blood he could see dripping out *for him* to take away his sin. He kept watching the blood and remembering the promise. He felt a brief moment of panic some hours later when Jesus died ... a powerful earthquake shook the earth. But then the sun came out of hiding ... glorious rays of bright light ... and a reassuring voice that seemed to come from no where, "Surely this man was the Son of God." "Yes, that's right ... the Son of God, gone home to his kingdom."

Near sunset now. Growing dark again. Vaguely aware of voices and some motion below him. A sudden sharp pain and the coarse crack of breaking bone as an iron rod smashes into his shin. Another blow: just the same on the other leg. Gasping. No air. Almost total darkness now ... and once again, suddenly, glorious rays of bright light ... much, much brighter than anything he'd ever seen before. And in that light the welcoming face of someone he knew.

*O Perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
To ev'ry believer the promise of God;  
The vilest offender who truly believes,  
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*

May Jesus' words of assurance and his promise of Paradise give us the faith and strength to endure our crosses throughout our lives and give us his perfect peace in the hour of our deaths. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***