

Midweek 4

It Is Hidden in the Savior's Rejection by the World

Text: John 18:33–19:1

- I. The world does not understand the message of the cross, nor does it want to.
 - A. The message of the law it despises.
 - B. The message of the gospel only provokes even greater hostility.
- II. We go up to his cross under the cross of that hostility.
 - A. The cross has two beams; one is the hostility of our own nature, and the other is the hostility of the world and culture around us.
 - B. Christ endured the humiliation of hostility and rejection, and so do we.
 - B. His humiliation and ours is God's way of glorifying his Word.

In our meditation this evening, on the way up to Jesus' cross and under our own, we consider an aspect of our cross bearing that we share with Christ and that he shares with us. It is this aspect of cross bearing: The cross always brings rejection, and to our astonishment, that rejection has glory hidden in it. We began to see that in our meditation last week; Jesus and his cross were rejected by the very ones who should have understood and embraced Jesus first. Tonight we see that the cross brings rejection from another still larger quarter: the cross brings rejection from the world. For the world neither understands the cross nor wants to understand it. Listen to a portion of St. John's record of Jesus' trial before the world in the court of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate:

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

Could there be a sharper contrast in all the world than the one we see here? On the one side is Jesus. He testifies that he is a king but that his kingdom is not of this world. He testifies that all who are on the side of truth listen to him, yes, listen to him in the sense of hearing and holding to his Word, in the sense of believing him, trusting him, and following after him.

But was there ever a more pathetic sight? Was there ever a more pathetic claim? Has anything in the world ever looked more ridiculous? Jesus is a king, handed over by his own people who scream for his death. Jesus is born to be the King whose kingdom consists of those who love the truth—and there is not one person who defends him or the truth; there is not one who speaks out in his favor, who is willing to come forward and declare himself a follower of this King. Jesus is the King; but those who should have been first in his kingdom cry out for Barabbas, a rebel and companion of murderers and thieves. Such a one they prefer to the King of truth! Jesus is a king now in the hands of a petty Roman official. Jesus the King had already been beaten by his own people and spat upon. And soon he will endure still worse at the hands of Pilate's soldiers. Some king! Some kingdom! Some truth to which this King bears witness! That's the King on one side.

Pilate stands on the other side as the spokesman and representative of all the kingdoms of the world, yes, of all of us as we are by nature. He views and judges this Jesus with his eyes and his reason. It may surprise us at first that unlike the Jewish high priest and court, Pontius Pilate actually was interested in and wanted to do justice. But more than justice, he was interested in and loved his own position and his own convenience. Doing justice lost out. Out of exasperation with all the bother that this king is causing him, Pilate orders him flogged. He comes to the conclusion that the whole message is nothing but foolishness. It is a foolishness that is a nuisance and a bother. This Jesus and his truth are inconvenient, and a mob is forming that could prove troublesome. Pilate sees no criminal in Jesus and no behavior in Jesus that deserves punishment. Nevertheless, he orders that Jesus be flogged, a punishment that all by itself was so gruesome and painful that it often killed its victims. And soon after the flogging, Pilate orders the execution of this king.

Why such hostility? Why such anger? Why such violence against something and someone that on the outside seems so weak and frail, even foolish? It all hinges on that one little word that Jesus spoke to Pilate, the word truth. Jesus said that he was the King of truth, the one who had come into the world to bear witness to the truth! Pilate, however, wanted no truth from this Jesus. He had already made up his mind, in fact, that there really is no such thing as truth; there is only me; there is only the moment. There is no truth; there is just my needs, my wants, my will, my goals, my ambition, my pleasure, my power. Those things are all the truth that Pilate wants and all the truth that everyone else wants too. Any other truth is bound to get in the way of those things that we consider the only truths and the only realities. Pilate doesn't even want to think about the possibility that there might be something else, something more. For if there is a truth beside me, more than me, he thinks, it will require that I give up my single-minded devotion to me in favor of something or someone else.

If Pilate would have listened, instead of just rejecting Jesus and the truth out of hand, would things have turned out different? No. They would have been no different. For the message of Jesus and his cross, the heart and core of the truth to which Jesus bears

witness, always provokes hatred and hostility from the world. The truth that Jesus came to give to the world is the truth evident already in the Garden of Eden. It is the truth that human beings are totally depraved and corrupt and fallen in their total devotion to self. It is the truth that even in their best works, they offend the holiness and justice of God. It is the truth that on our best days, the best of us deserve nothing but hell for ever and ever. That truth is irritating and rubs us all the wrong way. Even though the evidence of this truth is strewn generously over the pages of history, I still don't want to hear it. Though the evidence is right in front of me when I look honestly into the mirror of God's law, I want to hear nothing from that mirror either. Away with this truth! Away with the King who proclaims it!

But wait, wait! There is more to the message of the King of truth than the guilty verdict over all of us and all our works. He comes chiefly and primarily with this greatest truth of all: that he himself is the solution to the problem of our sin and guilt. The truth about us is the problem; the truth about him is the only solution. And how will he solve the problem of sin and guilt? Will he give us a new law to keep? Will he tell us that our sin and guilt don't matter after all? Will he bid us to just do the best we can and God will be satisfied and overlook the rest? Is that the great truth that he brings? If that were the truth that Jesus brought, the people would not have flogged him. For that's what people want to think; they want to think that no matter how bad they may be, they still have enough good or enough potential to save themselves. Had Jesus taught that, the people would not have crucified him. But the King of truth declares that he himself is the whole and complete, the only solution to the problem of sin and guilt, to the penalty of death and hell that all deserve. The solution is that he alone will embrace all the sin and guilt of the world. The solution is that he and he alone will suffer the penalty of death and hell for us as our substitute. The solution is that salvation, therefore, will be an altogether free gift, won by the crucified, deserved for us by the crucified, given in the message of the crucified. But tragically, the truth of the gospel that saves is even more despised than the truth of the law that condemns.

So here is the great mystery and the profound truth: So depraved is mankind that by nature we hate to be told the truth that we are depraved; and so great is our corruption that by nature we hate still more the truth that the only solution to the punishment we deserve is Jesus, the King of truth. You would think that people would stampede to this Jesus who delivers from death and hell. If we offered them free gas or free health care or free money, we would be trampled in the stampede. But free salvation? Free heaven? Free rescue from hell? No, not that! Away with him! Give us Barabbas, a crook and a murderer, rather than this Jesus! Him we want to crucify!

II.

We noted at the beginning of our sermon this evening that Jesus is not the only one who must bear the cross, though it is his cross alone that saves. Those who follow to the cross must also follow under the cross. That is the mark of the Christian, the sign of the cross. For wherever the King of truth appears with the message of truth, the one and only truth, there will be hostility, opposition, and often enough, even violence. As a cross has two beams, so the hostility to the cross has two beams as well. The first beam is the one that

we carry from our own nature. Pilate dismissed Jesus with the words “What is truth?” Pilate didn’t want an answer. He already assumed that there was no answer outside of himself. That’s what our own flesh says too. Don’t bother me with ideas about right and wrong that come from God, that come from the Bible. There is no right and wrong. There are only values. Today I like this, tomorrow that. People shouldn’t commit adultery; but if my children, my friends, or finally I myself decide to live outside of marriage in a relationship reserved for marriage, well, who’s to judge? People shouldn’t hold grudges or gossip. But you don’t know what was done to me! People shouldn’t steal or cheat. But the government wastes my money and businesses charge too much anyway. Besides, people cheat and steal from me; I just want what’s coming to me. People shouldn’t be arrogant and self-righteous, but let’s face it, we really are better than most, aren’t we?

Then comes the confession in the liturgy: “I, a poor miserable sinner.” “No, no,” objects our flesh, “I don’t want to hear about that. It’s so depressing, such a downer.” Then comes the message of forgiveness: “All you need bring to the cross of Christ is your despair of any good or merit in you; this will be his answer: ‘I forgive you; I wash it all away in my blood; I pay for it fully; redeemed by me, you are restored as a dear child of God!’” But the flesh likes that news even less! “I work hard. I deserve what I get. God is at least a little bit lucky that I’m on his side, and he should feel at least a little flattered that I believe in him at all, given the world we live in today. And if he doesn’t treat me right, I’ll fix him. I won’t believe in him anymore, and I’ll quit the church!”

So the first beam of the cross that we Christians carry is the beam of our own sinful nature that hates the truth of the law and despises the truth of the gospel. The second beam is the hostility of the world, of all in our culture who simply can’t stand the message of truth that Jesus is and came to bring us. Our world wallows in vice and wears corruption as if it were a badge of honor. The corrupt and perverted of the world declare their right to be corrupt and even demand that the rest of us respect both them and their perversion. And woe betide anyone who says, “But the Bible declares that all who do such things will go to hell.” And woe betide the one who says, “Jesus is the only solution and the only Savior and the only way to heaven and blessedness.” “No, no! Away with such a one,” the world declares. “If that’s what you want to believe yourself, well, go ahead and be a fool. But don’t go running around saying that that is the only truth, the truth that saves, the truth that, if rejected, dooms and damns the one who rejects it! Away with such a one from the earth!”

So we see Jesus today in our reading. He is the King. He is the one who brings truth, the only truth. But his glory and the glory of the truth that saves is hidden under the cross. He is despised and rejected by his own. And he and his message provoke the hostility of the world that he came to save. We see how hidden his glory is and how glorious the truth he brings is as we watch his reaction when he and the truth are spurned and spit upon. He endures it! He takes it! There is no lightning bolt from heaven to strike the crowd with the penalty that it deserves. There is no earthquake under Pilate’s feet to shake him up enough to make him listen to the truth that Jesus has come to proclaim.

And why not? Wouldn’t it better if there were a lightning bolt? Wouldn’t the truth at least get a hearing if there were an earthquake under Pilate’s feet? Yes. And wouldn’t our own witness to the gospel work better if we could send a few lightning bolts of our own to destroy the wicked and the mockers, at a least a few of them, and then knock some sense

into the rest of them? And wouldn't people be more willing to listen and to believe if just once in a while we could have a magnificent miracle or two to grab their attention?

The resounding answer to all those questions is NO! Christ bore the cross of shame and humiliation. The time will come for his exaltation and for judgment. But that is all in his hands and not ours. We journey under the cross as we go up to the cross. We share the weakness and the humiliation until the time of exaltation comes on the Last Day. And why is that? Because our glory too is hidden under the cross of rejection. Jesus wants his Word working quietly in hearts to get all the credit for creating faith when and where the Spirit works and wills it. Yes, he wants us also to recognize that it is a miracle of the first order when we believe his Word, a miracle wrought by the gospel message, not by our razzle-dazzle, our cleverness, or our might and merit. It is the hidden power of the cross that works its way in those who follow under it. The whole world wants to be rid of the cross and its truth and has tried to be rid of it for almost two thousand years. But nevertheless, the message is proclaimed by those following under the cross, and in some it still bears its precious fruit; it still works to create faith even in someone like the thief who died next to Jesus.

Yes, it is the glory hidden in the message of redemption in Christ alone that creates saints who lay their whole lives of sin and shame at the foot of Jesus' cross. There is still heard in the world the triumph song of the thousands who rise up again, still under the cross, to sing the praises of the Lamb that was slain and has redeemed us by his blood. And their joy is the product of the glory hidden in the only Savior and the one and only truth. They are not left to guess whether or not they may be right. They do not depend on a poll or public opinion or the view of the smartest or the most pious. No, their certainty rests on the Word of God and the work of God, even under the cross of hostility and persecution. Heaven and earth may pass away. But that will never pass away! Oh, may we ever remain in the blessed number of those who know that glory hidden under the cross. Amen.