

Midweek 6

It Is Hidden in Powerful Words

Text: Luke 23:32-43

- I. On the cross there is glory hidden in words.
 - A. Everyone else's words are pathetic, shameful.
 - B. Jesus' words alone are filled with grace and beauty, and that in the midst of deepest degradation.
- II. That glory hidden in words is powerful beyond imagination.
 - A. But those words are not mere sentiments; they give what they say!
 - B. That miracle is repeated time and again in every one of our church services:

Beautiful words from lowly men that accomplish powerful things.

We have almost come to the end. The humiliation of the Savior is just about complete. He has stumbled his way up to the altar of the cross. Without anyone to plead his cause, to defend him or help him, he has been nailed to the tree. And now in his last hours of deepest degradation, the glory of the cross shines brighter than the noonday sun. Listen to St. Luke's description of that degradation, and listen for the glory hidden in it. We read from Luke 23, beginning at verse 32:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

I.

We have reached our goal in Lent. We have followed Jesus up to the hill called the place of the skull. At the beginning of Lent, he called us to follow him there, not so that we could help him but so that all alone he could find glory. That glory is the glory of being our Savior. It is the glory of redeeming us without our help or aid. It is the glory of

offering up to God a perfect, complete, all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine. And now he is fast reaching his goal of attaining that glory, the glory of becoming the world's one and only Redeemer.

But, oh, how deep the humiliation that covers the glory and hides it from our eyes! He looks like the worst criminal. For that's whom crucifixion was for, the worst of criminals. Even the Law of Moses had said it: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (as quoted in Gal 3:13). He looks like the most despised of men, and he is, just as Isaiah had prophesied. There is no one to help. He looks like the weakest of all men. He does not seem able even to help himself.

Where then is the glory? How will we find it in this disgusting vision that St. Luke has painted for us in the text for this evening? The glory is in the words spoken by Jesus. They are words with a glory that outshines the splendor of the sun at noonday. The glory of Jesus' words in our text shine all the more brightly when we contrast them with the words of everybody else who had something to say in those opening hours of the crucifixion. Did you hear them? There are the rulers, the holy men of Israel. Why couldn't they just leave him alone in his agony? They had gotten their way. They fully expect to be rid of him soon. But, oh, no. They have to show up at the execution, and as we say, rub salt into the wounds. They preach to the crowd gathered there, some of whom had wondered if Jesus might be the promised Messiah. They preach to the soldiers who had been ordered to carry out the execution. They preach to anyone who just happened by to gawk at this gruesome scene. With scorn and loathing and contempt, they stand there and proclaim: "Look at him there, all you who pass by! Look at him! No Savior, this one! No, he is a fraud and cheat. Prove us wrong, Jesus! If you are the Son of God, come down, come down from the cross!" The cruelty of their words and the injustice of their words is underscored when they even admit that he was, at the very least, a good man. They say, "He helped others." Well, the obvious question is, if he helped others, why are you killing him? If he helped others, why do you have no pity when he is unjustly put to such a cruel death? The words of the rulers are wicked and show the wickedness of those who speak them.

The soldiers heard the sermon of the rulers. They shout their amen by joining in the mockery. Here these hirelings of the Roman government continue what they had begun earlier in the hall of Pontius Pilate. There they had given Jesus the crown of thorns and put a reed in his hand. There they had fallen down before him and called amidst laughter and blows, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And now to pass the time, they keep it up. No pity. Not a shred of human decency is to be found in their words either.

Then there are the words of one of the two men crucified with him. They are both criminals whose punishment is well deserved. If they say anything at all, at least from them we might expect a shred of sympathy and understanding. For evil though they be, they are suffering outwardly the same torment that he is. But no, even one of them joins in the chorus of ridicule.

So the picture of human depravity is now complete. Friends have failed him. Family is of no use to him. The official church, his church, has handed him over to heathens for judgment. The state has failed to do justice and instead has committed the greatest

injustice ever seen. And now every shred of what should be common human decency has been stripped away in the words of those who surround the cross on that dread day.

What will Jesus say? Will he at last call down curses from heaven on his tormenters? Will he fill his mouth with words of abuse to match those of the ones who mock him? After all, what more can they do to him than they have already done? It is not as though things could get any worse. So what will he say? Can you believe it? Can you even imagine it? This is what he says, not to them but to God: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." But, we call out, didn't they know what they were doing? The chief priests and elders hired false witnesses against him; they knew what they were doing. The Roman governor even declared earlier that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death; nevertheless, he sentenced Jesus to death. Pilate knew he was doing an injustice. How could Jesus say that they don't know what they are doing? And then to even ask God to take pity on the tormentors of his Son and forgive them! Have you ever heard the like? Can you imagine it? Can you picture yourself behaving that way with even a fraction of the abuse and the injustice that Jesus endured? How different this man of sorrows from anyone who ever lived, that he could say such a thing!

Then there are his words to the thief on his right. That crook, that criminal, is the only one there who spoke words that recognized the truth. He considered all that he himself had done to deserve what he was getting on his cross. He saw Jesus' behavior and heard Jesus' words in contrast to all around him. It would seem that this criminal must have known of Jesus' works and Jesus' message more than he saw that day. But be that as it may, he is moved to cry in his own torment words of faith: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And then listen to Jesus' remarkable reply to this remarkable prayer from the crook on his right: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Had Jesus said nothing, given his own pain and sorrow, we would not have been surprised. Had Jesus anything to say at all, if we were writing the script, it may have been something like this: "Here you are suffering what you deserve to suffer, and you have the gall to ask such a thing of me? You will rot in hell forever together with all of these people around me, just as you deserve and just as they deserve." But no! Nothing like that comes from the mouth of Jesus. Instead, he promises the criminal a gift, a free gift, a gift totally unmerited and so obviously undeserved, a gift for which the thief can never repay him even in the least. Jesus promises him heaven! That heaven will be his not after he has suffered a while in some imagined purgatory. It will be his that very day.

II.

What glory there is in those words of Jesus in the hour of his deepest humiliation! They are words more beautiful than any ever spoken by anyone, made the more beautiful by the contrast with the words of those around him. But the glory in those words is much, much more than beauty. Those words that Jesus spoke that day were filled with power unequalled and unimaginable. Think about that for a moment. The words of the rulers, of the soldiers, and of the one thief who mocked could inflict pain and, no doubt, did increase the pain of the suffering Savior. But those words had no lasting power. Jesus' suffering would come to an end when he breathed his last. Ah, but the words of Jesus on that day are filled with power. He prays, "Father, forgive them." No more powerful word

has ever been spoken. For the Father, who himself is about to abandon his Son, heard that prayer and answered it. He heard and answered not just for those surrounding the cross that day. He heard and answered it for the whole world, for each and every one of us! Just think of it. An answer to Jesus' prayers and cries in the Garden of Gethsemane must wait until Easter Sunday. But here in the depths of his suffering, he prays, "Father, forgive them." And then he finishes paying the price of that forgiveness in the suffering yet to be completed on the cross. Father, forgive them, he prays, and the Father accepts the payment for the sins of the whole world. It is just as St. Paul was to say later in 2 Corinthians: God was reconciled to the whole world by the payment Jesus made for the sins of the world. That is what Jesus himself had promised Nicodemus when he told Nicodemus that God loved the world enough to give his one and only Son for its redemption. That's the message of the whole Bible. That's the heart and core of Christianity. Christ was praying for our forgiveness there on the cross.

And God answered his prayer. The whole world was redeemed in these sacred hours of his sacrifice. Only those who reject what he did, who throw it away in unbelief, miss its saving benefit. They perish, not because God wants them to perish, not because their sins were not paid for here. They perish not because God refused Christ's prayer for them. They perish solely because of their own rejection of the gift, the redemption won for them.

The thief on the cross hears words equally beautiful and equally powerful. Jesus did not lie to him or merely express a pious wish for him in that dread hour. Jesus gave the thief what he won for the world. He gave him the paradise of the saints and angels. He gave him heaven at the moment of the thief's death as a testimony to the rest of us that heaven was won for all of us too. And that gift is ours full and free, no matter how far we have fallen or how often.

Oh, yes, there is glory hidden in these words. And that glory has not yet ceased. So powerful are these words of Jesus that they give to this very day what Jesus prayed for on that day. You hear it in the liturgy week in and week out, as thousands upon thousands have heard it for two thousand years. The pastor is just a lowly man. He has no glory of his own. But what glory hides underneath that lowliness, the glory of Christ's call, the glory that gives the pastor the command to declare as Jesus' spokesman: "I, by virtue of my office as a called servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to you; in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That majestic moment in the liturgy was bought and paid for on the cross. That powerful moment in the liturgy is still, to this very day and as long as the world will last, the Father's answer to Jesus' prayer that day. Jesus still prays it. He still holds before his Father the payment made. And the Father still accepts that payment for all of your sins and all of mine.

Oh, what glory shines there in those words most beautiful and most powerful but still hidden beneath the shame of the cross. As our journey up to the cross in Lent draws to its close, fix your eyes on Jesus alone. As our pilgrimage reaches its holy goal, may his words open your ears and your heart and your mind and your soul. May they fill you with sad and solemn repentance for your role in his suffering. For we have not come to the cross to help him. The role of Redeemer is his and his alone. Then may these words also fill you with joy unspeakable. He has prayed for you instead of for himself. He has paid

for your admission to heaven by his own suffering of hell. And the Father has answered Jesus' prayer for you. As far as God is concerned, your entrance into heaven is as assured as was that of the thief. That is the glory hidden on the cross. That is the glory hidden in these words of Jesus our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus our light and life, Jesus our joy, and Jesus our resurrection! Amen.