

He Saved Others...

Matthew 27:38-44

Lent 3, March 22, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Once again the voices of the passion say more than they realize.

Matthew's Gospel records that while Jesus was on trial some false witnesses testified that they heard Him say that He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. They were accusing Him of an assault on God's holy dwelling place on earth. Such an assault is blasphemous. They were hoping that this charge would stick, but their testimony did not agree. Matthew does not record for us what the discrepancies were, but whatever they were it was not enough to get the charge to stick.

In spite of that fact when Jesus is crucified the people bring this charge up again. They say to Jesus, "O You, who were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if You are the Son of God." The mockery is obvious. If Jesus has the power to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, then He would obviously have the power to come down from the cross and save Himself. By throwing this in His face, they are pointing out that it is ridiculous to believe that He has the power to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, therefore it is ridiculous to believe that He should come down from the cross. It is a sarcastic way of rubbing Jesus' powerlessness in His face.

But did Jesus really make this claim? Matthew does not record Jesus ever saying anything like this, but John does. In John's Gospel when Jesus clears the temple of the money changers, the Jews ask for a sign to confirm His authority to clear the money changers out of the temple. The sign that Jesus offers them is simple: Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it again in three days. So according to John's Gospel Jesus did say those words. But the Jews did not understand what He meant. They thought that He meant the building in which they were standing at the time the conversation took place so the Jews say to Jesus, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple. And you will rebuild it again in three days?" And just in case you and I don't know what Jesus is talking about John takes the time in his Gospel to spell it out for us, "The temple He had spoken of was His body."

If the body of Jesus is the temple of God, then the Jews did indeed destroy it. With the help of Pontius Pilate they had Jesus put to death. In three days Jesus rebuilt His body. That is to say that He physically rose from the dead. This was the sign that Jesus has the authority to clear the temple. It also means that the temple is His body. The original disciples remembered that Jesus had said this after He rose from the dead.

John's Gospel supplies the necessary account to understand that the people did not just make this up about Jesus. He actually did say those words. John's Gospel also tells us that Jesus is performing what He promised that He would perform before their very eyes. In other words while the people are mocking Him and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days..." He was doing precisely that. The temple was being destroyed and He would rebuild it in three days.

They said more than they knew.

The chief priests and the scribes point out, "He saved others." I am surprised that the chief priests, scribes, and elders actually say this. They are admitting that He did save others. Whenever He healed someone, He saved them. Whenever He forgave someone, He saved them. Whenever He cast a demon out of someone, He saved them. He did save others. They are quite right.

Then they point out, "He cannot save Himself."

They are talking about ability. They are mocking Him. When they point out that He cannot save Himself, they are saying that in spite of the many wonderful things that were attributed to Jesus, He cannot save Himself. They are pointing out that He has no power to save Himself and therefore is not worth following. One wonders if Jesus were as powerless as they say that He is why they bothered to go out to the cross at all. Surely if He were truly powerless they would not have had to have bothered. Their very presence at the cross indicates that even they think He has power. They are out there to make sure that He dies.

Thinking that He does not have the ability to do this, they cry out, "Come down from the cross and we will believe in You." And I suppose they would have believed in Him had He come down from the cross. Think what a spectacular event that would have been!

The irony is that He is still saving people by His death and that if He did come down from the cross He would not have saved anyone. The salvation that He bestowed throughout His life was contingent upon His death.

Here is where an understanding of the book of Leviticus is a must. Leviticus records not only that sin defiles, but all kinds of things defile including sicknesses and death. That means that sin is connected to sicknesses and death. Sin causes sicknesses and death and the demons are behind it all. It has been that way from the beginning.

Leviticus also prescribes the necessary things for the purification of defilement. The main and indispensable one is blood sacrifice. There must be a blood sacrifice in order for defilement to be removed. The defilement of the lepers that Jesus healed cannot be removed without a blood sacrifice. The sicknesses of the people that Jesus cured cannot be cured without a blood sacrifice. The sins that Jesus forgave cannot be forgiven without a blood sacrifice. And if the demons who accuse us night and day are to be silenced with that forgiveness there must be a blood sacrifice. But it cannot be the blood sacrifice of animals as Leviticus commands. Those sacrifices are only previews and types of the great sacrifice to come. It is the blood sacrifice of Jesus Himself that makes all of these healings, purifications, and forgiveness possible. As soon as Jesus performs His first healing and saves that person, He commits Himself to His own death. If He comes down from the cross they will all get sick again and the sins that He forgave will be unforgiven. He must stay on the cross in order to save them.

There for out of love for us, He cannot save Himself. It is not that He lacks the ability to do so. He lacks the will to do so. He lacks the will to come down from the cross. His will is committed to His Father's will. His will is committed to saving us. He is committed to forgiving us, healing us, and raising us from the dead. And so He stays on the cross. In spite of the temptation to prove to those who were mocking Him that He could do it, He does not do it. Think of the look on their faces if He had done it, but He does not do it. He stays there for us. He does nothing for Himself or His own glory. He does it all for you and for your salvation.

As I said last week, this truly makes Him the King of Israel. This is what the King of Israel does.

And finally, they point out to Jesus that God is not rescuing Him. They say, "Let God rescue Him now, if He wants Him, for He said, 'I am God's Son.'"

They are pointing out how no one is coming to rescue Jesus. That includes God. If God is not rescuing Him, they imply, then God does not want Him. If God does not want Him, why should we or anyone else follow Him or listen to Him.

And like everything else the voices of the passion say more than they know. He is God's Son. That is true. God does not want Him. That is also true. Here the paradox that achieves our salvation reaches its climax.

In order for Jesus to save you from your sins, He must bear the punishment for your sins on your behalf. Since you deserve death and hell for your sins, Jesus suffers death and hell in your place and on your behalf to save you from your sins. The essence of hell is God forsakenness. That means, among other things that God does not want Him.

In a peculiar turn of events God the Father does not want God the Son. It is not because God the Son did anything wrong. Far from it! God the Father announced at the Son's baptism and transfiguration that He was well pleased with the Son. That is not the problem. The reason that God does not want the Son is because the Son is bearing your sin on your behalf and in your place. He does it out of love and mercy for you. But when He does it, He is bearing real sin.

Your sins are real. It sounds obvious, but my experience is that some pastors and laypeople get the notion into their heads that the sins we confess in church are something other than the sins we are committing in the world. And so we believe that the sins that we commit in the world are not really sins. We think we can justify them. And so we come to Divine Service and we figure that we must be committing other sins that we confess at Divine Service. But there aren't any other sins. The sins that you commit in the world are the ones being forgiven in Divine Service. There is no justification for them. That is the point. Only Jesus can save you from them and He does so by bearing them in your behalf. When He does that He dies and God the Father no longer wants Him.

That is why one great and awesome voice is missing from the passion: God the Father's voice. Like so many times in the past an atrocity on earth is taking place and God says nothing. The voices of the passion in bitter irony present for us the truth. What they say in mocking is truth in fact. God does not want Him not because God does not want Him, but because Jesus is bearing your sin.

God put His not wanting you on Jesus and Jesus died so that God wants you.

The voices of the passion say more than they know

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.