

February 28, 2010

## WHAT OTHERS SAID AT THE CROSS

### “The Impossible Miracle”

*“.....Come down from the cross and save yourself!” Mark 15:30*

This morning is the second Sunday of Lent. As you learned last Sunday, Lent is the time when, in a special way, you remember the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Often during Lent, Christians have considered the seven sayings which Christ spoke from the cross. You remember them. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” “Woman, behold your Son!.....Behold, your Mother!” “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” “I thirst.” “It is finished!” “Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit.” These “seven last words” are often the focus for prayer and meditation during Sunday Lenten services and/or at Good Friday services. Most Christians are familiar with these words from the lips of Jesus. But, what did people say to Jesus as he died for the sins of the world? Instead of hearing what Christ said from the cross, we shall look at what individuals and the crowd said to Jesus.

Many years ago, when I was a child in Sunday school, I remember one of my teachers saying that God could do anything. Some of us in the class – particularly me and the preacher’s kid – enjoyed giving the teacher a rough time. We therefore asked, “Can God make a building so high that he can’t jump over it?” “Can he make a stone so big and heavy that he cannot lift it?” Needless to say, that teacher was pleased to see the Sunday school year and bid goodbye to my friend and me!

Now obviously, there are impossible miracles. The impossibility exists, not because God lacks the power to perform the miracle, but because the goals are mutually exclusive. So it was with the jeers and hoots of the crowd on the first Good Friday. Said the crowd, “Come down from the cross and save yourself!” “Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:30 & 32).

He who fed the five thousand, walked on the sea, raised the dead, healed the sick, and opened the eyes of the blind, could, if he had wished, come down from the cross. Christ, however, could not come down from the cross. He couldn’t do

it, not because he lacked the power, but because coming down from the cross would have defeated his purpose and goal of being the Savior of the world.

Yes, Christ could have come down from the cross and not have been the Savior of the world. Or, he could have remained on the cross and been the Savior. In short, the only way he could die for the sins of the world was to die for the sins of the world.

Now then, the New Testament gives us several images which point in the direction of the meaning of Christ's death. This morning I would have us understand these images and the understanding they give us about Christ's death which, of course, makes possible our salvation.

First, the Scriptures say, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13). During the first century a slave could gain his freedom if someone would pay what his master thought he was worth. A slave could not earn that payment, because whatever money the slave earned belonged to the slave's master. Thus, the only way a slave could gain his freedom was to have someone else buy his freedom for him.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul was saying that Christ, by his death, redeemed us and set us free. We were the slaves of sin, but we were redeemed by Christ's death. His suffering on the cross sets us free. We are redeemed.

Then, too, the Scripture tells us, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Whereas the symbol of redemption was that of setting a slave free, the symbol of ransom is that of setting a captive free.

The idea of ransom is as common in our day as it was in the first century. Pick up your newspaper, turn on the radio or television, and you will hear of some person or some group holding an individual for ransom. We all understand that the need for a ransom arises when someone is held captive by a hostile power. Generally speaking, when the ransom is paid, the individual is set free from the hostile power and returns to be with his family and friends.

In this symbol, Jesus was suggesting that, in our present state, we are held in captivity or in hostage to the power of evil. Christ by his death on the cross paid the ransom and set us free. This truth is confirmed in the First Letter of Peter: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your

fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The Apostle Paul wrote, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8). Here Paul was indicating that Christ was our substitute. In other words, Christ took the punishment which me, in our sinfulness, deserved. This is what we mean in the Apostles’ Creed, when we say, “He descended into hell.” Christ took our hell for us in order that we might enjoy his heaven.

We are free to accept the benefits of God’s love because of the pain he endured on our behalf. Sin did not go unpunished. Christ took that punishment. Christ is our substitute. He died for us.

Now then, when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to him for baptism, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). In the Hebrew religion, the lamb or goat was often used for sacrifice. The lamb was an offering used to gain God’s forgiveness for sin. By the death of the lamb, forgiveness was gained.

Christians believe that the sacrifices in the Old Testament were given by God to point to the perfect sacrifice for sin in the death of Jesus Christ. By his words, John the Baptist was saying that, what all the lambs and goats slain on Jewish altars could not achieve, Christ would accomplish by his death for us. He was the sacrifice which bought for us forgiveness, even as the sacrifice of lambs brought forgiveness to the Hebrews. Christ was the perfect sacrifice for sin.

All four of these New Testament images point to the nature and purpose of Christ’s death. Christ by his death redeemed the slave, ransomed the captive, was our substitute in divine judgment, and was the divine sacrifice – the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. This is why Christ came into the world. On the night before his death Jesus said, “.....for this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37).

And so, on the first Good Friday, the cry of the crowd, “Come down from the cross and save yourself!” was a cry for the impossible miracle. It was asking God to make a stone heavier than he could lift. It was asking him to make a building higher than he could jump. The salvation of humankind, your salvation and my salvation, demanded that he, who was certainly able to come down from

the cross, remain upon the cross. By remaining upon the cross, Christ performed the greater miracle of providing salvation for all people of faith.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, from which our text is taken, William Barclay has written: “The death of Jesus was absolutely necessary. The great reason of its necessity was this. Jesus came to tell men (and women) of the love of God. And if Jesus had refused the cross, if in the end he had come down from the cross, it would have meant that there was a limit to the love of God, that there was something which the love of God was not prepared to suffer for men (and women), that there was a line beyond which the love of God would not go. When we look at the cross, Jesus is saying to us, ‘God loves you like that, with a love that is limitless, a love that will bear every suffering earth has to offer for you.’”

My dear friends, during this holy Lenten season, may we all journey again to the cross and receive the limitless love of God. Let us all resolve this very moment that we will live our lives in obedience to him who died that we might live.

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