

March 21, 2010

WHAT OTHERS SAID AT THE CROSS

“The Voice of Faith”

“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’” Luke 23:42

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent. Lent is the season in the Christian year when Christians remember in a special way the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. During this Lenten season I have chosen to preach on the subject of “What Others Said at the Cross.” On three previous Sundays we have considered the insults of the mob which gathered at the foot of the cross, the insults of the chief priests, scribes, and elders, and the insult of one of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus.

The Gospels record only one sympathetic voice spoken to Jesus during the crucifixion. That word was spoken by the other criminal who died with Jesus on the first Good Friday. He uttered the voice of faith. This man obviously believed the claims which Jesus had made for himself. After the one criminal had insulted Jesus, the other criminal said: “Don’t you fear God 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.” (Luke 23:40-43)

Most of our lives are ordered by our needs and what we perceive to be our needs. In the face of death life is stripped of all its un-essentials. We are faced with what are our basic needs. In the words of this repentant criminal we see clearly what are humankind’s basic needs.

THE FIRST OF OUR BASIC NEEDS IS THE NEED FOR CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS. This was certainly the case with the criminal we are considering this morning. He proclaimed his own sin. He made his confession. Of his crucifixion on the cross, he said, “I am getting what I deserve for what I did.” This criminal made a public confession of his sin. He was also asking for forgiveness for what he had done.

It is a basic need of men and women to make a confession and to receive forgiveness. Guilt is a major problem of our day. Many people live their lives tied up in knots because of guilt they feel for the wrong they have done. We all have a need to acknowledge our sinfulness and receive forgiveness. That is why

confession of sin and assurance of pardon are a part of our order of worship on most Sundays.

E. Stanley Jones told about a little boy who was trying to grasp the understandings of the Christian faith, especially at the point of seeking forgiveness and entering into deep fellowship with God. His teacher suggested an analogy. "When you do as your parents desire," he said to the boy, "you feel good inside. But what happens when you disobey and when you go against their will?" The youngster replied, "I have a lump in my throat." The teacher and the boy prayed together, the boy saying to God: "I've always felt I belonged to you, but I've been afraid to say so. Now I say so!" They concluded their prayers, and the little fellow said joyously, "The lump is gone from my throat."

One of our basic needs is confession and forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Jesus Christ takes away the lump from our throats.

WE ALSO HAVE THE NEED TO BE REMEMBERED. The dying criminal wanted to be remembered. His request was, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Everyone wants to be remembered. Many years ago, when we lived in the Denver area, we drove to the mountain town of Georgetown for the day. While eating lunch there, we noticed a woman who looked familiar. We were quite sure that she was from Royal Oak, Michigan and the church we formerly served prior to moving to Colorado. Unfortunately, at first, we couldn't remember her name. Finally, however, after much thought, we remembered who she was. We had a brief, but delightful visit together. And she was most pleased that we had remembered her from our days back in Michigan.

Yes, everybody wants to be remembered. After all, that is why we have tombstones in cemeteries. To be forgotten is a kind of death. To be forgotten is to no longer live in the mind of the person who is important to you. Jesus Christ will never forget us.

We need to make our confession of sin and find forgiveness. We need to be remembered. **WE ALSO NEED TO BE ASSURED OF AN AFTER-LIFE.** It is said that the strongest of all our instincts is that of self-preservation. We will sacrifice almost everything in order to survive.

I believe that the drive for self-preservation carries over into our need for personal survival in death. Apart from the Christian faith and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, every culture in human history has had some kind of belief in an after-life. People desire to survive in a life to come.

This certainly was the case with the criminal who was crucified with Jesus. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Obviously, the criminal did not think that Jesus was about to set up an earthly kingdom. He knew that by the end of the day both Jesus and he would be dead. By his words of faith he understood that Jesus had a power beyond this earthly life. That criminal wanted to have a place in Christ's everlasting kingdom. And so Jesus' reply was, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus was indicating that he understood the criminal's desire for everlasting life. Jesus recognized and understood the criminal's new found faith.

Friends, I believe that the three basis needs of all humankind are seen in the voice of faith – words spoken to Jesus, expressed by the criminal who was crucified with Jesus. The dying criminal believed that Jesus could meet those needs. By faith he reached out and found what he needed.

I believe Jesus Christ meets our needs today. For, he comes to us promising forgiveness. On the night before his death in the Upper Room Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28) Our need for confession and divine pardon is fully met in the dying Savior who gave his life for us.

And Christ will never forget us. He himself said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). And, ".....I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Most importantly, in Christ we are assured of eternal life. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

Jesus Christ meets our needs. He gives us forgiveness. He remembers us. And He gives us eternal life.

But before we leave this dramatic word spoken to Jesus on the cross, one more important lesson must be learned. **IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO TURN**

TO JESUS CHRIST. There are, without question, other things in life of which we must say, “The time for that is past.....I’m too old for that now.” We can never say this of turning to Jesus Christ and accepting him as Lord and Savior.

Friends, as long as we are alive on this earth, the invitation of Christ still stands. “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (John 10:9).

Soren Kierkegaard told of an immense room with two doors. Over one door is a sign that reads, “Heaven,” while over the other door is a sign that reads, “Lecture on Heaven.” People are flocking through the door to hear the lecture. Behind the other door stands Jesus saying, “If you want to live a life so fresh and new that it would be as if you had a real chance to live life over again, then enter here. I stand at the door and knock in order to give you a second chance.”

My friend, Jesus Christ is knocking on the door of your heart. Open the door. Turn to him. Receive his forgiveness for your sins. And receive his gift of eternal life – as did the repentant criminal. Place your faith in him, today and every day. For paradise awaits you!

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