

March 7, 2010

## WHAT OTHERS SAID AT THE CROSS

“Any Special Tricks Up Your Sleeve?”

*“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.” Matthew 27:42*

Today is the third Sunday of Lent. Lent is the six-week period of the Christian year when Christians give special attention to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Lent is the time when we focus our thoughts on the final days of Jesus’ life.

The Christian Church has always believed that it is impossible to know the joy of Easter without first understanding the suffering and pain of Good Friday. We have to understand the crucifixion before we can fully appreciate the resurrection. During this Lenten season I have chosen to speak about the words which were spoken to Jesus as he hung upon the cross on the first Good Friday. This morning we shall consider the words of the chief priest, scribes, and elders. They spoke to Jesus and the crowd which had gathered at the foot of the cross. They mocked him, saying, “He saved others, but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”

Now then, the chief priests, scribes, and elders did not make a habit of going to crucifixions. They had more important things to do with their time. The fact that they went to Calvary, to witness the painful driving of the nails into Jesus’ hands, and to see him suffer and die, is a strong testimony of their hatred for him. By their words to Jesus and the crowd, we can see clearly the enormity of their hostility. I believe that what we see in the behavior of these men is what we will see whenever such anger and hostility is present.

**FIRST, WHENEVER SUCH HOSTILITY IS PRESENT, IT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN A LACK OF APPRECIATION OF THE GOOD.**

The person who is filled with anger and hostility cannot fully appreciate the goodness which surrounds him. So it was with the chief priests, scribes, and elders. They admitted that Jesus saved others. But, that was their problem. They were envious and jealous of what Jesus did. He was competition they could not beat.

Throughout his three-year ministry, Jesus healed those who were sick. He gave sight to the blind. He brought health and wholeness to those who were deaf and lame. Many were there that day on the hillside by the sea when he fed five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish.

It was in the village of Bethany that Jesus performed his greatest and most well-known miracle. Now, Bethany is as close to Jerusalem as Floral City is to this church. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in Bethany. There in that village Lazarus lay dead for four days. Jesus came to Bethany and shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" The dead man was raised!

The fact that Jesus "saved others" was well known throughout the city of Jerusalem and surrounding villages. Many people had witnessed what Jesus had done. The chief priests, scribes, and elders knew what he had done. But, they had no appreciation of Jesus and the good he had accomplished. Their attitude was, "What you did yesterday was yesterday.....Any special tricks up your sleeve today?" They cried out, "He saved others, but he can't save himself!" Those words to the cross on the first Good Friday showed a lack of appreciation of the many good things which Jesus had done for so many needy people.

Then, too, the chief priests, scribes, and elders manifested a second characteristic of strong hostility. **THEY DEMANDED MORE.** They were not satisfied with what was done for them. Have you ever had dealings with hostile people? You know that you can never satisfy the demands of such people. No matter what you do, it is never enough. Such people are quick to cry out, "But, what have you done for me lately?"

I know that if I were to meet someone who could walk on water, raise the dead, open the eyes of the blind, and feed the multitude, I would be convinced. I would not need to witness any more miracles. I would not demand more.

But, the many miracles Jesus performed for others were not enough for the Jewish establishment and authorities. They believed that he had to save himself. Let's assume for a moment that Jesus had saved himself and come down from the cross. I am sure that the chief priests, scribes, and elders would have had additional demands. They might have said, "Jesus, let us see you put yourself back on the cross." Or, "Put yourself back on the cross and come down a second time."

These men had engineered the crucifixion. Their hostility could not be overcome by anything which Jesus might do. The solution to the problem was in their hearts and minds. Their hostile attitude could only be solved by them.

In the personal relationships of life I see many people who are trying to meet the demands of those who are hostile. These people experience tremendous frustration because, no matter what they do to try to improve the relationship, their efforts do not end the hostility. Satisfy one demand and you are faced with yet another demand. Many people have as much difficulty in dealing with hostile people today as did Jesus over thousand years ago with the chief priests, scribes, and elders.

Yes, hostile people fail to appreciate the good and they always demand more. Finally, **THEY MISINTERPRET ANY GOOD WHICH IS DONE.** This was the case with Jesus. Jesus did not save himself and come down from the cross because he was the Savior of the world. The chief priests, scribes, and elders interpreted Christ's failure to come down from the cross as a lack of power.

General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, correctly understood the events of Good Friday. He wrote: "It is precisely because he would not come down from the cross that we believe in him." Oh how the Jewish religious establishment misinterpreted the drama of the cross! Here was the Lamb of God dying for the sins of the world. Here was the divine sacrifice. Here was the Son of Man redeeming the slave and ransoming the captive. Here was the full manifestation of the love of God. And all these men ever saw was a powerless, weak, condemned criminal dying without any other alternatives. The good which was done by Christ remaining on the cross was not perceived in its nobleness. It was made to appear worthless. Such is the behavior of the hostile personality.

Now then, we cannot go back in time and change the behavior of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. But their actions can serve as a warning to us today. We must be careful to appreciate goodness when we see it. We must ask if the hostility of the Jewish religious establishment is in us. We must be careful of falling into the practice of always demanding more. And we must avoid misinterpreting the good and the noble.

After falling down the deep shaft into the slimy, cold water at the bottom of the well, the man's first thought was to cry for help. But after hoarse calls led only to silence he began to try to climb. Again and again he tried to inch up the slippery, algae-covered brick, only to slide back into the water. His nails became

bloodied from his attempts to get a grip in the cracks. He simply couldn't make it to the top before slipping back. Despairing, he called out again.

A passerby appeared above. "Well, I can't get you out of the well, but I can make it better for you," said the passerby. "Here, have a fifth of whiskey." And so he drank the fifth, and being quite drunk, the well didn't seem so bad. But as sobriety returned, he was still in the well and miserable.

A woman appeared. "Well, I can't get you out of the well, but things could be much worse for you. You must accept your situation and make the best of it." So he tried not to feel sorry for himself and to be grateful to be alive, but it didn't work. He was still miserable and alone, and despair maintained its grip upon him.

He started to climb. He had always been able to take care of himself. But, bloody, cold, and hungry, now he slid back into the water again. And then another man appeared above. "I can get you out of the well, but you must trust me. Do you?"

The man in the well had never known before his need for another's rescue, and how this man would get him out he didn't know, but he said, "Yes, I'll trust you." And Jesus Christ dropped into that well. And upon his shoulders the man climbed out!

My friends, the Savior who did not come down from the cross, who did not save himself, can save us. The love of God, as it is seen in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, can save us from our sin and trouble and find a safe resting place in our hearts. May his great love guard and protect your life, today and always.

The Rev. Craig S. Davies, First Presbyterian Church, Inverness, Florida