Good Friday Sermon — 03/29/24

Text — Mark 15:39

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how He died, he said, “Surely this Man was the Son of God!”

Theme — “The Son of God”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Why do some people believe and others do not? That is a question that’s perplexed Christians for centuries. You all know what we say in the catechism’s explanation to the Third Article of the Creed:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith…

But still, it IS fascinating to see how that plays out. Quite often it is the LAST person we would expect who is the one who has faith. And so it is here at the cross.

The scribes and Pharisees, the priests and Sadducees, were all learned men. They spent their entire lives studying the Old Testament. They knew it backwards and forwards. They could recite it from memory. The written Hebrew language of the day did not include vowels, but only consonants, yet they knew what vowel sounds (and so which words) were meant. When the Wise Men came to Jerusalem seeking the new-born King of the Jews, these religious experts and scholars knew exactly where to send them — to Bethlehem — because God’s Word had prophesied it. They knew Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” passages which we heard a bit ago. They knew the prophecy fulfilled when Judas sold Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. They knew how Jesus fit EVERYTHING that God had promised about the coming Messiah-Savior. They knew it all. And yet they did not — they WOULD not — believe.

The crowds also were aware of those Old Testament passages. That’s why they sang and acted as they did on Palm Sunday. They had seen the miracles. They had heard the parables and teaching. It was all right there in front of their eyes. And yet how quickly they had turned on Jesus, with their shouts of “hosanna” becoming screams of “crucify!”

The apostles surely knew. If anyone should have gotten it, it should have been them. They were privileged to be with Jesus — 24 hours a day, seven days a week — for three solid years. They saw and heard things no one else had. They were privy to personal and intimate instruction from Him. They had been called by name to follow Him. How many times had Jesus even told them all that was about to happen? That He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. That He would be handed over to men who would crucify and kill Him. That He would rise again on the third day. Yet when it all happens, where is their faith?

Even the women — who at least had the courage and guts and strength to stay with Jesus as He carried His cross through those Jerusalem streets; who stood there and watched Him die, drop by bloody drop — they too did not get what was happening. And so they stand there, sobbing and wondering why. Including Jesus’ mother, Mary, who had had angels and prophets tell her about it in advance.

But then you have two people who DO believe. Two. Only two. Who confess Christ, even as He suffers and dies. One of them, a crucified thief hanging on the cross next to Jesus, also dying, who asks Jesus to remember him when Christ comes into His Kingdom. And the other, the subject of our sermon’s theme, a Roman centurion — a Gentile, a pagan, an idolator, totally unlearned in the Scriptures — who says at the death of Jesus: *“Truly this IS the Son of God!”* (pause)

Yes, Jesus IS the Son of God. And for the centurion, the proof was in what happened on that cross on Good Friday. If you take the natural reading of the Gospel accounts, this centurion was by no means a believer at the beginning of that day. But by its end, he most certainly was. He would have been in charge of the military detail assigned with carrying out Pilate’s order of crucifixion. They were the ones who placed the cross on Jesus’ shoulders and forced Him to carry it through the streets. They were the ones who stripped Jesus of His clothing — and what little dignity He had left — and then gambled for them. They were the ones who pounded the nails into His hands and feet. They were the ones who stood guard, making sure no one came to His assistance. And through it all, they laughed. And mocked. And reviled Him. It was all a big joke to them. Much like the other crucified thieves, they delighted in the suffering Jesus was experiencing.

But as was the case with one of those crucified murderers, something happened while Jesus was on that cross which caused our centurion to have a change of heart. What exactly was the precipitating factor we don’t know. Perhaps it was the words of Jesus from the cross, seeking God’s forgiveness for those who did this to Him. Perhaps it was the faith Jesus showed when He continued to trust His heavenly Father, despite the literal hell He was suffering, commending Himself into His Father’s hands. Perhaps it was words unrecorded in the Bible or something else that Jesus did while on the cross. Perhaps it was the sky darkening, the earth shaking, the other violent physical manifestation which accompanied Jesus’ death — we really don’t know. But this we DO know: the centurion’s words — *“Truly this IS the Son of God!” —* those words which were only uttered by the power and working of the Holy Spirit. (pause)

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith…

The Gospel — the Good News of Christ for us, suffering for our sins and giving us His righteousness — that Gospel the centurion saw played out in front of him, with his very own eyes. And, miracle of miracles, he believed. Furthermore, he confessed that faith. Church tradition gives this soldier a name and says that he became a Christian from that very moment. That he later suffered and died a martyr of the faith, because of what he had seen and heard and experienced that Good Friday afternoon at Mount Calvary. But that is only tradition. What really happened to him after this, the Bible does not say. (pause)

A Roman centurion and a dying criminal. The only two that day who confessed their faith in Jesus. Who would ever have guessed? Today we stand at the foot that same cross. Alongside the Jewish crowds, the religious experts, the Roman soldiers, the weeping women, the dying thieves. We see and hear the same things as did they. So what is OUR response?

The world around us all too often has the same reaction as everyone but that dying thief and that Roman centurion. They turn away from Jesus. They laugh and scoff and mock Him. They deny and reject Him. Oh, some perhaps feel sorry for Him (like those women). But so few actually respond in faith. Thankfully, however — by the power and working of the Holy Spirit — you believe. And confess. Jesus IS the son of God. The Savior of the world. YOUR Savior and Lord.

For you He was born. For you He took the whole Law upon Himself and fulfilled it. For you He picked up your sin and punishment and went to that cross. For you He suffered hell itself. In baptism He has called you — by name — to be His own and to follow after Him. In His Word you hear Him tell you of His love and forgiveness. In His Holy Supper you eat and drink His very Body and Blood which make all this your own. What happened that Good Friday at the cross was not a tragedy, a miscarriage of justice, an act of oppression, or any such thing. It was — and is — the central fact of your existence. For YOU, God has suffered and died. You are forgiven. You are His own. You have eternal life.

And like that centurion, you now live out that confession and faith. Oh, maybe not to the point of suffering martyrdom. But as Jesus has said, we DO take up our own cross and follow Him. You suffer for His sake and for the sake of the Gospel. You accept the world’s mockery and rejection. You endure the devil’s persecution. You sacrifice everything to follow your Savior. Because He IS the Son of God. And in Him you have forgiveness and life. Like Him, you die so that you might rise again. Just as He has promised. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Offertory/Offering

FE — Offertory