

Ecumenical Seven Last Words of Christ Service

April 3, 2011

“Today you will be with me in Paradise” : Luke 23:34b-43

^b And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Well, what do we expect, we who stand in this crowd and watch the spectacle? How could we not expect this standoff among the powers at play: the Roman military, the religious hierarchy, the popular criminal element, and Jesus?

Why didn't we know all along? Early in Luke's Gospel, in Mary's song of triumph way back in Luke 1, we're told there's a revolution to come--God lifting up the lowly, scattering the plots and plans of the proud, showing mercy on those whose reverence is for God, rather than for human power. The situation into which Jesus was born is documented in detail: Judea is weighed down under Roman rule, meted out by the Judean puppet-king, Herod. We know the birth trip to Bethlehem, hometown of Jesus' ancestor, King David, was required by a decree to pay taxes to

their imperial rulers. And all the while, faithful men and women like Simeon and Anna have waited and prayed for the Messiah to save God's people from the reign of terror, waited and prayed that God's glory would shine through Israel once again.

So what else might we expect in this final scene of Jesus' life but an argument about who is king over whom? "This is the King of the Jews," the sign says, as if here, where the powers of wealth, might, culture, law, and religion clash head-on, everything depends on nailing his identity down. Here we are, where all the forces are gathered in a battle for the last word: Roman soldiers, religious authorities serving at the pleasure of the empire, criminals, silent watchers, and Jesus. We might have expected it would come to this. And in case we didn't, there's a sign that declares the issue: "This is the King of the Jews."

It's intended as a slap in the face of all the Jews under Rome's emperor. But if it is also the truth, what *kind* of king is Jesus? Just a few days ago he was wildly popular, welcomed like David, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey of peace. Today he is legally guilty of sedition, cursed under religious law, and rejected as a troublemaker for the whole system. "*This is the King of the Jews,*" the sign says.

Three times Jesus is taunted, as bullies often belittle their victims: "You saved others, save yourself," the leaders shout, wanting the crowds who were following Jesus to return to *their* leadership. "If you *are* the King, save yourself," the soldiers scoff, knowing the legions upon legions with which Rome could crush a local king. "Are you not the Messiah?" the first criminal challenges, "save yourself and us," he urges, hoping that Jesus' zealot band might riot and free them all. As if Jesus cared about popularity, military might, or political revolt.

Only one person gets him, the one on the outer fringes of society, the one least likely to carry weight the powers that be: a criminal, an outcast, a sinner who sees Jesus clearly through his own culpability, instead of through his pride. He

recognizes holiness when he sees it. He alone sees in Jesus the mercy God always promises to those who realize just how much mercy they need. Only he sees what an extravagant bounty of mercy is ours for the asking.

This is the kind of King Jesus is, one who heals our lives with mercy instead of crushing them with justice. Jesus is the kind of King who wins by loving, in spite of our resistance. Jesus is the kind of King who does what we least expect a king to do: he lifts up the lowly, brings down the mighty, fills up the hungry, sends the self-satisfied home empty, heals the sick, raises the dead, and turns a criminal into a companion. How could we not see how wide his welcome is, whose presence in our most torturous hells makes room for peace and Paradise?

How could we not see? Because we read the wrong signs. We look for proof of God's favor in popularity, in position, and in might instead of in our brokenness and his. *We* can be with him today in Paradise, too. *We* can be with him today in Paradise, but only through our brokenness and his.