**Luke 23:33-43 March 17, 2021**

**Witnesses on the Road to Golgotha IV: Thief on the Cross**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Happy St. Patrick’s Day. While St. Patrick was not a witness on the road to Golgotha, and therefore not part of our Lent sermon series, he was a missionary and defender of the faith. He was a man who believed the truth of the Gospel and staunchly defended the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Here on his day, we remember him. He was one of the lucky ones, like St. Valentine, and St. Nicholas. We remember them. We observe their days in all the wrong ways, with green beer, flowers and chocolates, and presents under the Christmas tree, all that focus away from God rather than point to him, but still, we know their names. At least they have that. Not all the Saints are so lucky. Between St. Valentine’s Day and St. Patrick’s Day there are 5 commemorations and 1 feast day. Earlier this month was the observance of Perpetua and Felicitas, martyrs of the faith. Last month we had observances and commemorations for Polycarp and Martin Luther, as well as Philip Melanchthon, Philemon and Onesimus. The feast day was in observance of St. Matthias on February 24th. We observed none of them in any way. If the saints that we recognize on specific days can’t even get our attention, what hope does our witness for tonight? Why should we take time to even look at him? He’s a thief. He’s a criminal. Why even focus on him at all? Is he just an insignificant man who was witness to a monumental moment? Or could he perhaps, be the hero we’ve been waiting for in this story, all along?

During the readings throughout these past few weeks you have heard a lot about the King and His Kingdom. When the religious leaders of Israel brought Jesus to the governor Pilate to request a death sentence, they raised the one charge they knew Pilate had to consider: the charge that Jesus claimed He was a king. Pilate wanted to know what kind of king Jesus claimed to be so that he could gauge whether or not Jesus would be a threat to Pilate’s political position or even pose a threat to Caesar’s reign. Strangely, the only person not concerned with King Jesus was King Herod, the son of the man who tried to have the child Jesus killed to prevent a rival king from taking his throne. Even the mob was worrying about the so-called King of the Jews, doing everything they could to distance themselves from this King Jesus and instead declare their devout and unending allegiance to Caesar. They all talked about the King, but they took neither Him nor His Kingdom seriously.

In the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “*Thy kingdom come.*” And Martin Luther tells us, “*God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead holy lives here in time and there in eternity.*” It seems that we don’t take the kingdom very seriously, either. If it means you must lead a holy life, do you truly want the kingdom of God to come among you? If it means that you must submit to the will of God rather than your own will, do you really want Jesus as your King? If it means that you must trust God for all that you need to support this body and life—and trust Him for eternal life and salvation on top of that—do you truly welcome the reign of Christ? It’s hard to take the Kingdom seriously when you’re suffering or ill or depressed or mourning. It’s hard to take the King seriously when He’s stripped of His clothes, abandoned by His disciples, hanging on the cross.

Although, that’s where our hero comes in. He sees this abandoned, beaten, bloodied man on the cross, and it was not until Jesus was hanging on the cross that someone took seriously the reign and realm of Jesus. It was not Caiaphas or the priests or the Sanhedrin, for to them the idea of Jesus as King was just a charge they could bring to Pilate so they could have Jesus killed. It was not Pilate or Herod or their soldiers, for their acknowledgment of Jesus as King of the Jews was a way to mock Jesus and belittle those who brought such a silly charge against Him. It was not the mob, for the mob refused to acknowledge Jesus as their king at all. Instead, it was a criminal, usually called a thief. And not even this criminal started out taking the reign of the King Jesus seriously. Like the other criminal, this one started off with mockery for Jesus. But something changed. For some reason, as the one criminal resumed his verbal abuse of Jesus, the other stepped in. “Don’t you fear God?” he said. “We’re being punished the same as this Man, and we deserve this punishment for our crimes. But this man is innocent.” We can imagine all sorts of motives for this change of heart, but only one can explain his reaction. You see, this criminal heard the words of Jesus that begged absolution for everyone responsible for crucifying Him. “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*”

Here is why this man is the hero and not the villain. He changed. The words of Jesus changed him. Never had the thief heard such gracious words spoken. Nobody else had, either. “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*” Were those words spoken for him, too? This man was hanging on a cross, punished for his crimes. He knew he deserved this punishment. He knew he deserved the mocking of the crowds. But after hearing Jesus, an innocent man hanging on a cross that He didn’t deserve, ask the Father in heaven to forgive the people who put Him there unjustly, he knew this Man hanging next to him couldn’t be just a Man. Thanks to Pilate’s inscription hanging over the head of the Christ, the criminal knew the Lord by name: “Jesus.” The name means “Savior”; and this criminal, hearing those words of absolution from the one named “Savior”, put his trust in this Savior, this One who could forgive the same people who wrongly crucified Him. He trusted that Jesus could forgive even him, a criminal and a sinner. After hearing those words of absolution, it was natural for Him to cry out to the Savior, “*Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*”

This criminal on the verge of death is the first to embrace Jesus as the King of a heavenly kingdom. It didn’t matter that his life had been lived in opposition to the Word of God. It didn’t matter that his conversion happened the very day he died. Having heard the confession of sin and the confession of faith of this criminal, Jesus said to him, “*Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” That is the kind of King that Jesus is; that is the kind of Kingdom over which Jesus reigns. Jesus is the King of love and mercy; He rules over a Kingdom of grace. He hears the prayers of the faithful, and He graciously answers them in whatever way is best. He begins with our cries for forgiveness and mercy; and such prayers, such confessions made in faith, are requests that He is pleased to grant. That is why He endured the cross in the first place: to pay the purchase price which would redeem sinners. He paid the wages of sin on your behalf. Through the mouth of His called and ordained servants He tells you that you, too will be with Him in Paradise. What other king could be so great as the King who dies for those He came to reign? The cross is His throne, His death the coronation. The first thief mocked Jesus by saying, “If you are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” But had Jesus saved Himself, He would not have saved anyone but Himself. In bearing the sins of the world to the cross, bearing them to death, He purchased forgiveness with His blood for all who cling by faith to His sacrifice on the cross. There is no waiting for a future glory. There is no purgatory to pass through. When you close your eyes in death, Paradise belongs to you. Forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation belong to you who cry out to the King.

Saint Paul tells us that the cross of Christ is foolishness to some and a scandal to others. To those who insist on clinging to their own works, relying on the death of Christ is foolishness. To those who despise the Word of God, relying on the death of Jesus is a scandal. But to those who cry out to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness, the cross reveals Jesus as the King—the King who will welcome us into His heavenly Kingdom of Grace with the words, “*Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” Remember him. Remember them all, but for tonight, on a day of green beer, a celebration of Irish heritage, put all that aside. St. Patrick won’t mind, that you remember Christ, who remembered this thief, the villain turned hero, who recognized the true King of a heavenly Kingdom.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.