

“He saved others, but he can’t save himself” (Part One)

Reflection 7 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

On any series of reflections on salvation, one has to enter into the great mystery of Jesus’ death. Why was it that Jesus died? This has raised all sorts of thought and speculation. And churches over the years have suggested various reasons, like: substitutionary atonement theory, and ransom theory, and *Christus victor* theory, and moral influence theory. And there are others. And just about here eyes glaze over as this most sacred and mysterious of events is reduced to sometimes heated debate between scholars.

For many centuries many churches have taught something like this: Jesus died the death it was ours to die. We were supposed to hang on that cross, each of us. Our sins outrage God. They dishonor him. They are a shameful offence against his perfect holiness. And now his honor, his dignity, his holiness must be appeased somehow. In medieval terms, we have offended our liege Lord, our High Lord, and now his honor must be upheld. But we cannot do this. We are not good enough. We are vile and unworthy (our hymns tells us this when we forget). And so God sends his Son – his perfect Son – to die in our place.

This was a view that made perfect sense in the Middle Ages, and for many centuries this is what many churches have taught. Never mind the way it pictures God as a outraged medieval monarch or the way it pictures us, children of God though we be, as wretches; the truth is that no one view of the Cross fully comprehends its mystery. And so there are very large questions about the death of Jesus, and churches have worked out large doctrinal structures on such matters, and have sometimes done horrific things to those who didn’t agree. But the truth is that thoughtful people have always had differing perspectives on these matters.

There is a sacred mystery at the heart of Jesus’ death, and sometimes it’s good to just go back to the basics, back to the original texts, and look at what happened and the deep, deep, deep spiritual truths that were played out that day just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Let’s consider Matthew 27:32-44. It’s a text that, on one level, doesn’t require much commentary. Just tell it, and let the heart begin to discover its own truths.

Still we might ask: Why did Matthew write this? And why these details and not others? Each gospel writer makes certain selections. Why these details? Why the reference to Simon of Cyrene who was forced to carry Jesus’ cross, or to the execution taking place at Golgotha which means The Place of the Skull, or to Jesus’ refusal to take the wine mixed with gall? Why does Matthew stress the dividing up of Jesus’ clothing by casting lots, or the written charge placed above his head, THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS, or the insults, the insults hurled by those who passed by?

Surely it’s because the truth is in the details here, not just in the death, but in the way Jesus died. And Matthew is saying, Look! Look! Look! Look at the manner, the style

of this death. Now look especially at the insults: how those passing by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “You said you could destroy the temple, and rebuild it in three days; you can’t save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” And then there were the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders, mocking him, “He saved others but he can’t save himself! He’s ...ha! ... the King of Israel! Some king! Let him come down from the cross, and we’ll believe in him. He trusts in God ... ha! Let God rescue him now if he is the Son of God.”

It’s always hard to handle insult. Someone just starts screaming at you for no reason you can tell. I’m walking down the street with my grandson Ezra, and some angry woman starts yelling at me because she thinks she saw Ezra throwing a twig in her flower garden – it turned out, an imaginary twig at that. But it’s always hard to handle insult. Someone doesn’t like the way you do your job. Someone just told a joke about you at the water cooler. Someone is saying outrageous things about you to someone else. And a bird of the air (drawing on Ecclesiastes 10:20) carries the insult to you: “Do you know what so-and-so’s saying about you?” Maybe you actually feel someone’s murderous rage. You realize they really don’t like you. And your face flushes. And your blood pressure rises, and your adrenalin pumps. And you want to fight and run away and hide all at the same time.

And you’re not hanging on a cross in just a loincloth, with nowhere to hide, and insults coming from everywhere: the passersby, the guys being crucified with you – you’d think they could sympathize, and later one does – but also the chief priests, the elders, the teachers of the law! Surely you could expect fairness, some level of decency, from them.

It must have been so tempting for Jesus to do something. It’s so tempting for us! You think of a dozen things to do, a thousand things to say. But remember who he is! The power he has! He could have come down from the cross. He could have incinerated them with a word! As the hymn goes: “He could have called ten thousand angels To destroy the world and set Him free.”

And now look at what they’re saying about him, at exactly what they’re saying: “Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” If you are the Son of God! Do you hear the echo? Do you remember where Jesus had heard that before? Out in the wilderness of Judea – do you remember? – just after his baptism, and the speaker was who? The devil (Matthew 4:3,6). “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” And then standing on the highest point of the temple, “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down.” And now: “Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God.”

The testing, the temptation, continues to his very last gasp. Really it’s the same test from first to last. At the feeding of the 5000 (in John 6) when the crowd would have taken Jesus and made him king by force, it would have been so easy. He could have had it all – all the power and popularity without a cross. Or just the night before when the temple guard had come to the garden to arrest Jesus, and Peter had drawn his sword and cut off

an ear, Jesus had said, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”

Then it’s always the same testing for all of us, and it very often comes down to whether to save yourself or others!

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week