

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS

(8) JESUS CONDEMNED

Luke 19:28-39

Luke 23:1-5, 13-33

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SCRIPTURE

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop” (Luke 19:28-39 NRSV).

¹Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” ³Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” ⁵But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place” (Luke 23:1-5 NRSV).

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve

death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.” ¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²²A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished (Luke 23:13-25 NRSV).

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” ³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (Luke 23:26-33 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The Sunday before Easter is known as both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday (at least in our tradition). When the emphasis is on Palm Sunday the liturgical color is purple. When the emphasis is on Passion Sunday the liturgical color is red. In either case, this Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, a time in the church year when we remember how Christ gave his life in love for the world.

Palm Sunday recalls Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Typically as the service opens, palms are waved to re-enact the Jerusalem crowd wanting to crown Jesus as king. But as the story unfolds, their shouts of praise turn to demands for his crucifixion; he receives a crown of thorns as he is handed over to be mocked and killed.

Passion Sunday recalls the events that unfold over the next few days, especially Jesus' suffering and death, events collectively named "the passion," a name derived from the Latin word meaning "to suffer." Jesus underwent his passion as a condemned prisoner. But as Luke's account makes clear, he is no ordinary condemned prisoner.

Normally a prisoner would be the epitome of helplessness. You are made to go where you do not wish to go. You are made to do what you do not wish to do. But Jesus the prisoner does not come across as helpless. In fact, he seems to be the only one in control of the situation.

He is the one who leads the way to the Mount of Olives (Lk 22:39). He prays and tells his friends to pray (22:40-41). He takes the initiative with Judas who betrays him (22:48). And when the crowd comes to arrest him he stops the disciples' resistance as soon as it begins. Jesus is not taken. Instead he hands himself over. He is not resigning himself to the inevitable. He is taking charge.

During the trial he does not allow himself to be bullied. He reminds his accusers of his true authority. Throughout the ordeal there is this extraordinary sensation that the one on trial is somehow orchestrating the trial.

Jesus refuses to engage Pilate. In the face of unfolding injustice he says but three words. But his silence is neither despair nor stubbornness. It is a strategy for moving events toward his ultimate goal.

Pilate becomes confused. Herod gets frustrated. The religious leaders scream to try to gain control. A real criminal is set free. A bogus charge of sedition is filed – a capital crime. Yet Jesus remains the calm conductor.

When I say "calm" I do not mean to imply dispassionate. Far from it. The fact that Jesus was nailed to a cross expresses to us that Jesus knows the depth of human experience. He is described as "a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand" (Is 53:3 MSG). If Jesus was affected by normal human things such that he wept, got tired, thirsty, even angry; how much more would he be affected by this painful and completely unjust execution. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells us that Jesus emptied himself of his divine prerogatives in order to completely identify with our humanity (Phil 2:7-8). There is nothing in human experience that is strange to Jesus, no hurt that is outside his sympathy.

But Luke does show us that Jesus is not overwhelmed with despair or flailing helplessly while being swept along by events (23: 26-33). He has it together. When Jesus speaks his mind is steady. He is focused on what he has come to do. He is cognizant of the

impact of his mission on ordinary people – like the women weeping to see this condemned prisoner heading for the Roman gibbet. He turns to them and says:

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children” (23:28).

And then later:

“For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (23:31).

The latter is a figure of speech meaning, “If they do this to one who is innocent what will happen to those who really are guilty?” But Jesus is not trying to frighten the women. Yes, he warns them of the upcoming destruction of the city which has failed to accept the invitation of God. But even if it is too late for the city it is not too late for individuals like the weeping women to recognize that God has sent an innocent man to die for the sins of his people.

At the cross Jesus is hoisted between two criminals. As he dies to save us he is mocked for his inability to save (23:35-37). But what does he say?

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34).

And to the criminal who expresses remorse:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43).

The condemned Jesus is in control. He even controls the eternal destiny of those around him. He has the power to forgive. He is judge over all the earth. He is in charge.

But how does he use his power? How does he use his control? He uses it for us.

If I am given control over a situation I tend to use that control for selfish purposes. Oh, I may try to help someone else but almost always that someone else is someone I know and for whom I have fondness. If I have power I am going to use it for me and mine.

Not so Jesus. His “is the most powerful expression of determined selflessness the world

has ever seen.”¹ He uses his power, exercises control, and determines his destiny for you and me. If this does not fill you with great marvel and bottomless gratitude then nothing will.

¹Gary Millar, *His Mission: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke* (D.A. Carson & Kathleen Nielson, editors), (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 105.