

Luke 23

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Luke 23.¹⁻⁷

¹And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. ²And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Cæsar, saying that he himself is Christ a King.”

³And Pilate asked him, saying, “Art thou the King of the Jews?”

And he answered him and said, “Thou sayest it.”

⁴Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, “I find no fault in this man.”

⁵And they were the more fierce, saying, “He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place.”

⁶When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man were a Galilæan. ⁷And as soon as he knew that he belonged unto Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time.

It seems unlikely that Luke anticipated or intended that his original reader and then future readers would have any sympathy for either Pilate or the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus before him. Certainly, in Luke’s telling, Pilate does not exactly offer a profile in courage and decisiveness. The Roman Curator’s stock will not rise as Luke’s story continues. At the same time, the Jewish leaders who bring Jesus before Pilate are not profiles in honesty and openness. Their stock, too, will go lower as Luke proceeds with his narrative. All, Roman Curator and Jewish leaders alike, are profiles in manipulation, dishonesty, and cowardice. But, this does not mean that the antagonists in our current narrative have nothing to offer the modern reader. In Luke’s hands, they act, however unwittingly, in revelatory ways, revealing the devious machinations of this “present evil world.”¹

First, for Pilate. What does he reveal? He seems to reveal himself to be a Roman with a sense, however weak, of Roman “justice”—a once “righteous justice” that was, over time, chipped away at until it became utterly capricious in the hands of Roman Emperors. Mostly, though, he reveals traits all too common among politicians: cowardice, for one, and a penchant for self-preservation for another. Justice must play second fiddle to the politician’s need for self-preservation.

We see this in Pilate’s decision to send Jesus to Herod. Initially, Pilate pronounced Jesus “not guilty.” With the immediate negative reaction of his audience, he realized, too late, that he had acted too quickly and with too little thought for how his decision might be received. This set him looking for a way out. The best way out of difficulty is often to find someone else to take the burden or the blame. In this instance, he found and eagerly turned the trouble over to another politician: Herod—someone, as we will see, that he couldn’t stand and for whom he had never shown the slightest sincere respect.

If all this sounds familiar, it should. Even today, it is standard operating procedure among many of the political classes. Initially, most American Republican political leaders couldn’t stand the 2016 GOP front runner for president. Yet, they cow tailed to him and kept their contempt for him quiet lest his adoring mob grow angrier than they already were and threatened the politicians hold on power.

Now, for the Jewish leaders. They too serve as revelators in Luke’s hands. Whether Jesus intended or desired it or not, it would have been very difficult to listen to Jesus’ teaching and watch his actions and not contrast him with Jewish leaders. But, of course, Jesus did intend that such contrasts be observed. When Jesus wasn’t openly and forthrightly (and not uncommonly) lambasting them for their rigidity, legalism, and inhumanity, his teachings and actions cast a bright light on the rigidity, legalism, and

¹ See Galatians 1.⁵

inhumanity of Jewish leadership and undermined their authority (It seems likely that Pilate would have, himself, observed, and agreed with Jesus' assessment of Jewish leadership).

The Jewish leaders who brought Jesus before Pilate knew that their real reasons for wanting Jesus punished and even killed wouldn't fly with the Roman Curator. So, in hopes of manipulating Pilate, they accused Jesus of being a political enemy to the Roman Empire. Their hypocrisy is obvious, of course. They hated the Empire and were no more interested in preserving its power than it was in preserving theirs. The Jewish leaders would have received any diminution of Rome's power with exultation, and a thousand thank offerings in the temple to boot. Nevertheless, they feigned loyalty to Rome and sought to manipulate Pilate by appealing to Pilate's loyalty to Rome.

For reasons good and bad, wise and foolish, Pilate found the accusation that Jesus was a political rebel unwarranted. In Pilate's estimation, Jesus was no threat whatsoever to the Roman Empire. In this, he showed himself lacking in discernment. For just as Jesus' teachings and actions shined a spot-light on the injustice of Jewish leaders and undermined their authority, his teachings and actions shined a spot-light on the injustice of the Roman Empire and would, eventually, undermine its authority.

Thus, the Jewish leaders, almost surely unwittingly, spoke a revealed truth when they accused Jesus of being a danger to the Roman Empire. It is certain that on no planet on which Jesus' teachings and actions might be accepted and imitated, can a kingdom such as that of the Roman Empire long endure. Indeed, Jesus, along with the principles for which he stands and which he teaches are, as scripture makes abundantly clear, a clear and present danger to all cowardly and deceptive politicians and to all unjust kingdoms, empires, countries and nations. Jesus is a very real threat to the kingdoms of this world.

So, what does all of this have to do with Lent? Well, first of all, this narrative is part of the passion narrative. But secondly, it can offer us an avenue of repentance. Lent is a good time to consider the sort of citizen of the world we are, and the sorts of demands we make of our politicians and governments. Lent is a good time to repent of our support—either through actively participating and condoning, or through silent and cowardly acquiescence—of government injustices, especially those perpetrated against the vulnerable, marginalized, and innocent. During Lent we can, if we choose, see the face of Jesus in every innocent victim. The Lent and Easter season are very good times to pray that “the kingdoms of this world” may become “the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ” and that he “reign for ever and ever.”²

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 25, 2025)

² Revelation 11.¹⁵

Luke 23.⁸⁻¹²

⁸And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.

⁹Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing. ¹⁰And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused him. ¹¹And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate.

¹²And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves.

We have all heard the proverb, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” The proverb goes back at least 2500 years. We see its twisted logic at the national level as far back in history as we can see. We see it today at both the individual and societal level. It is, today, operative the world over as individuals and nations jostle for dominance. America has played the game as well as any nation in history. The evil insight has produced millions upon millions of victims. But, most pertinent to this passage from Luke and its accompanying meditation, the attitude expressed in the parable was as important a contributor to Jesus’ murder as any other.

The truth spoken by the proverb is intimately connected to the phenomena of the scapegoat. To oversimplify a bit, a scapegoat is an individual or group that two or more other individuals or groups select and victimize—emotionally, rhetorically, spiritually, and/or physically—in hopes of establishing peace, unity, and security between the victimizing individuals or groups. Often, the attackers are at odds previous to their coalescing around the victim. Their united effort against the victim often does bring reconciliation and unity, though it is normally highly volatile and temporary. Its magic soon loses its power and must be renewed as new suspicions and hostilities erupt. Scapegoating is a despicable, arbitrary, unpredictable, and uncertain means of achieving peace, security and unity. It is evil and Satanic.

Jesus was a scapegoat, but not in the way we often think of it. God did not scapegoat Jesus to create peace with a humanity at odds with Him. To think He did so is, in my view, the basest form of theology. It does violence to God. As Luke makes clear, it was Herod and Pilate and the Jewish leaders that created and used Jesus as a scapegoat. Like America’s modern GOP, Caiaphas could baldly, and without fear of blow back advocate grotesque attitudes, behavior, and public policy against a perceived threat and common enemy. Killing Jesus, Caiaphas proposed, would prove a boon to the nation. It would insure peace and security.

“Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.”¹

This insight is insidious, not inspired. In fact, I would make the argument, as I have elsewhere, that peace and security and righteousness and harmony would have multiplied immensely had Jesus been permitted a normal life span, another fifty years, say, to teach and act out his revelation of God and his life of love and peace and respect. The decision to kill Jesus united utterly desperate groups and had them working in concert for the first and last time in their long and tortured relationship. A mob, infected by the poisonous idea, joined the feeding frenzy, and Jesus died an innocent victim’s death. The “peace” did not last long. It would not be long before Herodian, Roman, and Jew were once more at each other’s throats. Soon, Masada would become an apt symbol of the unsteady love affair that scapegoating produces.

¹ John 11.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰

Relationships are difficult. We all get out of sorts with each other. If the break is serious enough and our interest in renewing the strained relationship is strong enough, we often utilize a scapegoat. A husband and wife, for example, can find unity by identifying a common foe or foil. Two friends can repair a wound between them by identifying a third party against which they can unite. All is well for a while. But it never lasts. It does not address the real, underlying issues. It is certain that a scapegoat and the uniting around a common enemy cannot create lasting relationships. It is not the foundation upon which an eternal marriage can be built. Eternity, the world of God and all glorious and glorified beings, do not and cannot endure upon any such twisted ideal or the actions it produces.

To the degree to which we condone or engage in this vile ideology and, thereby create innocent victims, we become implicated in Herod's and Pilate's and the Jewish leaders' deicide. We crucify Jesus anew for "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."²

During Lent we should examine our relationships—with man, with woman, with child, and with God. We should repent, forsake, and seek forgiveness for the vile and ungodly practice, endemic in 2025 America, of finding peace and wellness through the wounding of another. We can use the Season to influence in whatever humble way we can the society around us so that it, too, forsakes the vile and ungodly attempt to form unity through hatred rather than through love.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 28, 2025)

² Matthew 25.⁴⁰

Luke 23.¹³⁻²⁵

¹³And Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴said unto them, “Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: ¹⁵no, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. ¹⁶I will therefore chastise him, and release him.” ¹⁷(For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.)

¹⁸And they cried out all at once, saying, “Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas:”

¹⁹(Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.)

²⁰Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. ²¹But they cried, saying, “Crucify him, crucify him.”

²²And he said unto them the third time, “Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go.”

²³And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. ²⁴And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required.

²⁵And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

In examining this passage, I often asked students, “If you were asked to identify one or two things that you think Luke most wants to stress with this passage, what would they be?”

How would *you* answer?

I do not know if it came to your mind, but one of my students’ not uncommon response was something as follows: “We, like Barabbas, are guilty of crimes. In our case, our guilt is sin against God and His law. We deserve to be punished and suffer spiritual death. But just as Barabbas was freed and Jesus took his place, so too does Jesus suffer our punishments in our stead. By this means, he ‘satisfies justice’ and makes it possible for us to avoid suffering for sin while allowing God to remain just.”

This substitutionary view of Jesus’ Atonement is very common. It has a long history. It is closely related to the idea of a scapegoat. In this socio-judicial mechanism, a goat (and sometimes a human, a Greek *Pharmakos*) has the guilt of individuals or society pronounced upon its head and then is either driven out or outright killed. Jesus is, in this scenario, the scapegoat.

I have often made known my reservations about this substitutionary “theory of Atonement.” Wherever one comes down on this question, it seems to me that this story of Barabbas is a weak and, indeed, flawed analogy concerning the substitutionary role Jesus is supposed to play in our judgement and our escape from the “grasp of justice.” Consider, for example, that in the substitutionary theory of Atonement, Jesus’ suffering in our place is presented as wholly “just.” Jesus’ substitution “satisfies” and “fulfils” justice’s requirements. Indeed, in accepting and participating in this substitution, God Himself is portrayed as just.

But in Luke’s narrative, there is nowhere the slightest, teeny-tiniest bit of suggestion that Barabbas’ release and Jesus’ arrest and death was “just.” Pilate is not portrayed as having acted justly. The Jewish religious leaders are not portrayed as having acted justly. Rather, Barabbas’ unwarranted release and Jesus’ unwarranted arrest and death are both portrayed as acts of utter and gross injustice. If one wants an analogy for Jesus’ supposed substitutionary role, it seems to me this is not the place to look for it. Best to look elsewhere (One can’t help but wonder if this substitutionary reading of this particular passage isn’t

simply camouflage, allowing us to ignore injustice, avoid its uncomfortableness, and shirk the risks associated with resisting it in our own society—in other words, avoid following Jesus).

So, what is a better “main point” that Luke might be making? First, clearly, Jesus was innocent of any capital crime. He was a victim of the system. This system was administered by one, Pilate, who by his own admission thought Jesus innocent and saw in him no threat to the system (as we have said before, the assumption that Jesus was no threat to the system was erroneous, for Jesus most certainly did represent a threat, just not in the way that the system could conceive of as a threat—through the violent exercise of power). Secondly, the system that perceived him to pose no threat and found him innocent, nonetheless had him executed.

Those who administer this world’s systems of “justice” all too often seem corrupt and unjust. All too often, those who administer these systems seem to care little about matters of guilt or innocence. They do not seem to lose sleep over victims of injustice. They seem mostly interested in maintaining their power in a power structure that has the possession of power as its sole goal. Hence, Pilate’s yielding to the Jewish leaders’ obvious unjust charges against Jesus and their demand for capital punishment over the need for justice. Keep the people happy. Keep one’s power.

Luke, then, along with the other Gospel writers, increasingly presents Jesus as a victim of this world’s evil rather than a victim of God’s thirst for “satisfaction.” Jesus becomes the archetypal victim. He becomes a uniquely qualified advocate and source of hope for them.

Lent gives us the opportunity to review the injustice perpetrated against Jesus, consider the injustices all too common in our society, and examine the sort of citizens of the world we are. It is a good time to consider Jesus’ voluntary victimization and what it means for our world and its victims. It is a good time for us to commit ourselves to join Jesus in one of his principal missions: to advocate for and bring justice and hope to victims of humiliation, disfranchisement, cruelty, and injustice.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 31, 2025)

Luke 23.²⁶⁻³¹

²⁶And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus.

²⁷And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. ²⁸But Jesus turning unto them said,

“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me,
but weep for yourselves, and for your children.

²⁹For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say,
‘Blessed are the barren,
and the wombs that never bare,
and the paps which never gave suck.’

³⁰Then shall they begin to say to the mountains,
‘Fall on us;’
and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’

³¹For if they do these things in a green tree,
what shall be done in the dry?”

As we have seen in previous meditations, in his passion narrative of Jesus’ final days and hours, Luke recorded numerous sad and painful moments: among them, Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, his disciples’ abandonment and denial of him, Jesus’ trials and torture, and the judicial decision to execute him. In upcoming meditations, we will read of additional painful events: Jesus’ nailing to the cross, his struggle to breath, his dying words.

We might almost pass over this reading as a bit of interlude between the suffering narratives. But, after consideration, we might decide that the tragedy of this narrative is equal to any that has preceded or that will follow.

First, for my part, in reading page after glorious page of Luke’s account, I wonder at Jesus’ insights—insights into God, insights into human nature, insights into the path to human improvement and eternal progress. I am amazed over and over again by his ministry of service, love, and compassion. I am amazed at the many people whose lives he so greatly improved by an encouraging word, powerful touch, or kind action.

To be sure, he did not deserve to die the death he died. His mortal end was not fitting to his character. And so, I am somewhat disappointed by what, effectively, amounts to his final words, at least as Luke reports them. He will, of course, speak from his cross. But, while we can learn even from them, they were not really words of instruction. He could hardly breath, as is common to one being crucified. The few words he uttered came out in little more than short bursts of air between struggling breaths—half sentences, single words, groans of pain. His final words of instruction should have come in a crescendo of compassion and wise instruction. Instead, Luke has him serve up this dark and threatening finale.

“You women who follow me lamenting, you think this is bad? You haven’t seen anything yet. The worst of it is yet to come. If a truly innocent person such as myself can be made to suffer like this, just imagine how those not innocent will suffer. So, darker days are ahead for you and your beloved children. It will then be worse for you and yours than it is for me now.

“How bad will it be? You will wish you had never had children. Better to be alone in the world than to watch your children suffer as they will suffer. Die as they will die. In those days, you will desperately wish you were dead, finding it preferable to being alone in the world with nothing but the reminder of your children’s death to torture you.”

Such a finale of words simply does not seem to fit with all that has come before in Jesus' noble life. Such darkness seems at odds with his earthly ministry and its purposes. I, for one, would have far preferred different final words to have come from his godly mouth. But there they are. There's just no escaping them. They are what they are. The words of an untamed and undomesticated Jesus. They are, in the end, part of the Messianic message. They must be circumscribed into Jesus' life and ministry. They must be bravely circumscribed into the one great whole of truth. We must resist the temptation to turn away and ignore.

The words that Jesus spoke to those wailing women are a sad, sad testament to the madness of the human heart. Even Jesus, with all his hope and faith, could not deny what really was, what really is, what really always has been. The innocent are made to suffer in this world. As if the conditions of this world were not brutal enough, the world's mad and twisted actions and the values that drive them add to the suffering of the innocent. Jesus stands as a warning witness to this brutal truth. And Jesus warns—or is it a promise—the world will get its comeuppance.

During Lent we should consider the future that awaits us. Will Jesus' warning words reflect the truth of our future, or will we act to change them? Will the madness continue or will we adopt Jesus outlook? What will we do to try and stop the madness of the present evil age? What *can* we do to stop the madness? Will we continue to countenance victimhood and thus become victims ourselves, or will we demand the end to victimization.

Lent is a good time for us to commit to follow Jesus; follow his example of service and love; follow his teachings, teachings that will make us and those we choose to serve authentically human in this world, and eternally glorious and progressive beings in the world to come. Now is a good time to decide whether and how we will advance Jesus' joyful vision of wholeness and wellness and peace or whether we will become participants in his final, dark vision of madness, ruin, and misery.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: April 3, 2025)

Luke 23.³²⁻³⁸

³²And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. ³³And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. ³⁴Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. ³⁵And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God."

³⁶And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, ³⁷And saying, "If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself."

³⁸And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

In a laudable desire to comfort. The writer of Hebrews assured his readers that "we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."¹ Thus, we have a very well-informed and experienced tutor to direct us through life's labyrinth of temptation. The writer succeeded in comforting. At least, he did me. I believe his witness and make use of it constantly.

But, in declaring that Jesus "was in all points tempted like as we are," it seems to me that he was not being exactly accurate. It is saying far, far too little of Jesus' temptations. It is certain that his temptations went well beyond, infinitely beyond any temptation any other human being ever faced or will face. Indeed, he "descended below them all."² It is, in fact, impossible to imagine the sorts and levels of temptation that Jesus assuredly endured and transcended. But, as usual, that won't stop us from trying.

Imagine, for example, having the power to deliver oneself from any discomfort, any suffering, any form of death. Imagine then experiencing the worst discomfort and the worse suffering, and facing the worse sort of death. Imagine, finally, not using the power you possess to deliver yourself from that discomfort, that suffering, and that death. What willpower! What love! And then, imagine that nearly everyone around you, friend and foe alike, tempts you to demonstrate the power you claim to possess to deliver yourself from discomfort, suffering, and death.

Imagine the appeal of action at the time of your arrest. Imagine the appeal of action at the time of humiliation. Imagine the appeal of action during your suffering. Imagine the appeal of action, not only to relieve yourself from the discomfort, suffering, and death, but from the humiliation and ridicule. Imagine how tempting it is to prove yourself right and everyone else wrong. Imagine how tempting it is to justify all that you have said and done, indeed, of your very existence. Or, if you are better than all of that, imagine how tempting it is to act so that others will be convinced of your righteous claims and thereby be saved.

It is no accident that the Gospels record the temptations that Jesus faced to ease himself of and deliver himself from all discomfort, suffering, and death. Though the first recorded incident of this temptation took place in the desert at the urging of Satan, it seems almost certain that it was part of Jesus' life long before that. Though it might seem the temptation ended with his death, I often wonder. Does he suffer still? Does he suffer because of us? Is he ever tempted to end the suffering by eliminating us, the cause of so much divine suffering?

But, no, he continues to suffer with an eye towards others' advancement. In Jesus' final, "Eloi, Eloi,

¹ Hebrew 4.¹⁵

² See DC 122.⁸

lama sabachthani?’ which is, being interpreted, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” we hear, perhaps, Jesus at his lowest, deepest suffering. He discovered what all the rest of us so often feel, alienation from God. But, oh how much worse for him; for he had always lived in an intimacy with God that is beyond our present imagination.

“And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him.”³

If there was ever a moment when he examined the possibilities of self-preservation, this must have been it. But, he endured. He resisted. He conquered. And thereby, he revealed the unimaginable grandeur of the Divine Character. And by that revelation, we are, or can be saved. So, focusing on Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross is not an exercise in morbid focus on the dying and dead Christ.

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God... But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”⁴

Lent is a good time to examine, learn, and apply the many, many lessons Jesus taught us from his high and lofty cross. It is a good time to discover that humble portion of power that we have, and commit ourselves to use it, not for self-preservation, but for the betterment of all those around us. Today is a good a time to “deny” ourselves and “take up [our] cross, and follow” Jesus. “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”⁵

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: April 5, 2025)

³ John 8.²⁹

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1.^{18, 23-24}

⁵ Matthew 16.²⁴⁻²⁵

Luke 23.³⁹⁻⁴³

³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.”

⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.” ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

⁴³And Jesus said unto him, “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

“To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” Thus, according to Luke, Jesus spoke to a criminal. I think I’ve heard it all... the debates about this saying.

“It’s a good example of why we believe the Bible only insofar as it is translated correctly,” maintained one zealot, who, with his precise definition of “paradise,” maintained that Jesus could in no way, shape, or form have considered a criminal worthy to enter “paradise”—at least as far as that astute theologian understood “paradise” and its occupants. “Thus, we must be dealing with a mistranslation.”

“Well,” once opined another, “What Jesus meant was that he would see him in ‘spirit prison’” “Oh no,” countered another, “haven’t you read the Doctrine and Covenants. Jesus did not, himself, enter spirit prison, but only trained and authorized others to do so.”

“But wait,” another clever theologian reasoned, “remember when we serve others we are God’s arms. So, when “missionaries” taught the criminal it really was as if Jesus himself were visiting him.”

“But,” another, not so confident budding theologian asked, “It says ‘today’... doesn’t it? Surely that’s significant.” “But Jesus was only talking to the second criminal, who, clearly, had repented. So, they will have seen each other ‘today’ in paradise.”

On and on it goes.... Our talking about things about which we know next to nothing as if we knew everything. And we will not even discuss my own wonderment at such moments: “Why do we call it ‘spirit prison,’ anyway, rather than ‘spirit school,’ for example. For, according to our DC theology it is a place of teaching rather than a place of torture, is it not?”

I often wonder why we are so intent on doing this sort of theology. Why do we attempt to turn Jesus into a Hasidic Jew commenting on every Biblical word? Notwithstanding all our theologizing, I, for one, don’t know exactly what happens when we die. If Jesus, and then the criminal does, more power to them. But what I do know is what my eyes see under Luke’s direction and what my personal encounters with Jesus teach me. Three men were suffering terribly. Two of them, unsure what came next, if anything, did not want to die. If there was any chance of surviving, they would take it. At this point, Jesus was their only hope. Hope. HOPE. Jesus offers hope. Even in these dire straits—his and theirs—Jesus seeks to comfort through hope. This is what I hear and see in Luke’s account. This has been Luke’s message about Jesus from the beginning.

For many years I read John 13-17 and looked only for the “theological insights” that Jesus, the master theologian, left his disciples in his final hours. But then, one day, I read with new eyes and a different heart the bad news Jesus delivered his disciples.

“Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, ‘Whither I go, ye cannot come;’ so now I say to you.”¹

And I read how very, very sad they were at this news. I heard the sadness in Peter’s response.

“Lord, whither goest thou?... Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake.”²

I heard their fear and anxiety and uncertainty. I heard their devastation. “What will we do without him? We’ve come to rely on him, how will we survive? What will become of us? We’re in trouble... without him.”

And then I heard Jesus’, “Let not your hearts be trouble...,”³ and I understood. I understood that Jesus cared deeply for these men. He cares about all of us, as he would prove in the last hours of his life, more than life itself. He couldn’t leave his disciples feeling sad, lonely, helpless, and hopeless. He must try. Try to comfort them. Bring the hope and promise that they had always felt in his presence.

It is through this lens, the lens of personable-ness, hope, and comfort rather than the lens of “theology” that I now read John 13-17. It is also how I understand Jesus’ words to the thieves who accompanied him in death. They were words of comfort in a most trying time. This is the Jesus I have come to know. Jesus may be the greatest theological genius of all time. I don’t know. I don’t care. In my brief encounters with him, he has been busy comforting and offering hope. Now, that’s a “theology” I can believe in.

The Lent and Easter seasons afford us the chance to do the kind of “theology” that concentrates on the Divine Character and its impact on our lives. It is a good time to seek the anchor of hope that Jesus is so expert in giving. It is a good time to commit ourselves to seeking out others who could use a little, or a lot, of hope and comfort through the pleasing word of God and through our own compassionate service. It is a good time to find ourselves and share with others this hope:

“And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen.”⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 21, 2024)

¹ John 13.³³

² John 13.36-37

³ John 14.¹

⁴ Enos 1.²⁷

Luke 23.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁰

⁴⁴And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

⁴⁵And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

⁴⁶And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit:" and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

⁴⁷Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous man."

⁴⁸And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. ⁴⁹And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.

According to the Gospel writers, only three hours passed from the time Jesus was nailed to the cross until he died. As these things go, this was a relatively short period of time to hang on the cross before dying. The Romans had crucifixion down to a science. They could and did crucify people in such a manner as to make them last for days on the cross.

But even only three hours must seem like an eternity when one is suffering the excruciating pain of crucifixion. It is not pleasant, thinking of crucifixion. To focus on it can seem sensationalistic, even grotesque and macabre. Why not focus on "the Living Christ"? And yet, every Sunday, millions of LDS folk gather for "sacrament service." Here, they remember Jesus' death. Here they break his body anew. Here they spill his precious blood again. The ordinance is about death. The only hint of life in this ordinance is the life that the participant is promised through the remembered and renewed death of Jesus Christ.

However unpleasant the imagined sights and sounds and smells of crucifixion, the Christian is to revisit them over and over and over again as they seek to come unto Christ and be redeemed and perfected in him. Indeed, so central is Jesus' crucifixion to our salvation that Paul thought it, essentially, synonymous with "the Gospel" and associated it with "the power of God."

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."¹

The Seasons of Lent and Easter give us opportunities to remember, not just weekly but daily, hourly, the crucifixion of the Jesus, Son of God. They provide ample opportunities to confess the power of the crucifixion and the cross. They provide additional opportunities to remember that the crucifixion and the cross contain within them the very Good News of God's commitment to all of us.

The crucifixion and the cross may not be pleasant to consider, but we can, like Enoch of long ago, find indescribable peace and joy in them. Though he "refused to be comforted" because of the sin of humankind, when "Enoch saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; ...his soul rejoiced, saying: 'The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world...'"² May the message of the Easter Season bring us all such joy.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 21, 2024)

¹ 1 Corinthians 1.¹⁸

² Moses 7.⁴⁷