

¹⁶The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" ¹⁹Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). I wonder whether the soldiers who crucified Jesus were surprised to hear that from the man on the cross. They were probably used to hearing their victims curse them. But the soldiers heard this man asking for their forgiveness because "they do not know what they are doing."

They probably thought, "of course we know what we are doing." They were bringing Roman justice to this pretentious little man who thought he was a king. What were they supposed to do? Quake in fear before him? This little no-name Jewish upstart who's arrested and looked so powerless. What a joke.

They were sure that they knew what they were doing. And we know how wrong they were! How can they hope to escape hell on the last day? They laughed at and tortured the Son of God. They spit in his face!

None of us wants to be standing anywhere near these soldiers on the day Jesus Christ returns in his glory, wearing a crown, not of thorns but of divine authority. And that is why we must beware of even our slightest drifting in their direction. Now, we protest quite strongly that we would never join in their mocking and disrespect. But we do; we do when we don't know what we are doing. And on that day, we must catch ourselves quickly and pray to God:

Forgive Us for Despising Our Savior's Claim!

- 1. We think that we are more important than he.*
- 2. Father, let Jesus be the foundation of our lives.*

1.

Why would the soldiers be so especially cruel to this one man? Consider the times in which they lived and the ruthlessness of the Roman empire. It was Roman policy to humiliate and torture the condemned. Those who earned the punishment of the cross were to be put on public display, nearly naked, pinned to the wood, and bleeding and gasping and dying for all to see.

But with Jesus, there was more. His case seemed to call forth an even greater kind of cruelty than did, for example, the cases of the two criminals who were crucified at his right and his left. No crown of thorns on their heads; no scornful bowing and scraping happened in front of them. With Jesus, though, it was different.

The soldiers could really get into it with him because they didn't take him seriously at all. Everyone knew that on Sunday he entered Jerusalem like king. People had shouted out that he was the Son of David, the great Messiah, the King of the Jews.

Some king, the soldiers thought. Where were his armies? Where was his glorious crown? Where was his robe? Where was his scepter? This is the best Judea could do for a king? So much for the Jews being the chosen people of God with a Messiah-King to lead them to everlasting glory. It was all a joke!

To Roman soldiers, "King of the Jews" sounded like foolishness since there was no ruler but Caesar and his legions. Judea was conquered territory. And to them all the grand, religious debate surrounding Jesus being God was just childish and laughable.

And that is why there was a crown of thorns, a scepter to beat him with, and a rough cloak thrown over his torn and bloody back.

V18-20 They began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

The same attitude is wide-spread in the world around us. Jesus and his words are despised. You believe in the Bible? Are you kidding? Society has moved far beyond that foolishness. We're more enlightened now. We

don't want those ancient rules to govern our life today...we want the freedom to sin in whatever way we feel like...and don't you dare call it a sin.

The results of this can be seen all around us. On a certain secular college campus, there was a professor who felt it was his called duty, to argue, and ridicule the Christianity out of any believing student who happened to enroll in his class. He actually boasted about this. And we can be certain that he isn't alone. Such an attitude is also seen in the contempt with which our faith is often treated in books and entertainment. The world often wants us to shut up and keep our faith to ourselves.

And even we find ourselves tempted to edge toward such an attitude. It would just be easier for us to live without this embarrassing faith or at least to keep it hidden deep. Sometimes you just don't want to be the one who is being made fun of for your beliefs. Sometimes our God-given faith demands something we don't really want to do or condemns something we'd really like to be doing. Then it's easier to listen to the world. It is then, especially, that the temptation comes for us not to take all this Bible stuff so seriously, but to grow up and join the 21st century like everyone else.

If that kind of thought starts up in your head or your heart, beware. Repent of it. It is the beginning of the sin of idolatry, really; it is replacing our Lord and our God with ourselves. We become the foundation of ourselves and life and will eventually let no one claim to have any authority over us. Before we get that close to the Roman soldiers let us pray fervently, "Father, let Jesus be the foundation of our lives."

2.

The trouble with those soldiers was that they had based their lives on something less than what God holds out for us. Remember how Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount, talking about building your house on the rock or on the sand? The soldiers couldn't tell the difference. Everything God wanted them to base themselves on, the place he had prepared for them to stand forever, had no appeal for them. "Repent and believe in Jesus Christ!" That is the solid ground. But to those foolish men, it seemed worse than the sand.

Repentance was not even in their vocabulary because they didn't believe that they had really done anything horribly sinful—even when they tortured their victims, they felt it was perfectly justified. These Romans had no room for any Ten Commandments. These foolish Jewish writings were of no use to the masters of the world. To them, it was all silliness.

But we know much better than they did what is our place in the world. We, who are citizens of a modern superpower, might be tempted to feel as arrogant as the Romans did. But we, at least, we Christians, have learned better at the feet of our God.

We know our place. And what is that? On the one hand, we are just creatures put here by a God who has every right and authority to demand our obedience to his laws. This means we have no call on deciding that one or any of these laws don't really apply to us. We don't have the right to decide that this or that commandment can't really fit into our lives in this time and this place. God's code is for all time. This means that we must approach his laws with the greatest of awe and respect and trust—trust that the Lord God knows better than we do how we ought to lead our lives.

But that is only on the one hand. On the other hand, we are much, much more. We are the redeemed children of God through faith in Christ. The reason Jesus was in the hands of the Roman mockers was to save us from our sins. Through his suffering and crucifixion he would wipe away all our guilt and make us the sons and daughters of the Almighty. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7). That includes our thoughts that spring up and want to deny our Savior. Includes the times when we hide our faith from the hostile world. When we make ourselves the foundation of our life and not him. He takes them all away forever.

This means that out of love for him and out of respect for our Redeemer's wishes and trusting in his wisdom, we will gladly obey his Word. We understand how great a claim he has on us as our Savior, our God, and our King. How could we deny that we belong to him who paid so great a price to make us his own?

We look at ourselves differently now. We now belong to him, not to ourselves. We are his people upon the earth, put here to do his will as it is clearly recorded in his Word.

Christ and his Word, then, are the very bases and foundations of our entire lives. We are glad and honored to be the servants of this great King. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," Jesus once said, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:29). How could anything but Jesus Christ and his Word be the foundation on which we build our lives?

He is denied and mocked by many, but we pray that he may always be honored and acknowledged by us. The Roman soldiers had no time for his assertion to be the King of the Jews, and they made it clear in the shameful way they treated him. But we bend our knees before him who shed his blood to save us from hell and to make us his own. We gladly confess him as King and pray for the strength to obey his Word. Let all the world mock or ignore his claim. But we pray, "Heavenly Father, make us ever more truly his subjects in his wonderful kingdom of grace. Make him the foundation of our lives! Amen."

25 March 2009

Midweek Lent #5

Vicar Adam Nitz

Trinity Lutheran Church

1268 Pleasant Valley Road

West Bend, Wisconsin