

Matthew 27:11-54 The Son of God
April 2, 2023

No one account of the Passion contains in it the whole story, represented by an attempt to include all four accounts and make one story out of them. This impulse to integrate the stories has been common among believers from the beginning. The results have not been satisfactory. So let us read *one* account of the crucifixion. This year we consider the story of the cross as it is given to us in the Gospel According to St. Matthew. It is a lengthy reading, but since the cross preaches itself, I thought we would include it as a part of the sermon.

11 Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

12 When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” 14 But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

15 Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. 16 At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. 17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” 18 For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

19 While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.”

20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

21 “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor.

“Barabbas,” they answered.

22 “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”

23 “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

25 All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

27 Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and

mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said.
30 They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. 31 After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

32 As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. 33 They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). 34 There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. 35 When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. 37 Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. 38 Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” 41 In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42 “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” 44 In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

The Death of Jesus

45 From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. 46 About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

47 When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.”

48 Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 49 The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split 52 and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.

53 They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!”

There is a bluntness to this account that all four gospels share. Jesus was arrested, tried in both religious and governmental settings, condemned of a capital offense, and executed by crucifixion.

There are a number of sermons that could be the focus of our attention; the curtains of the Temple or the opening of the tombs; the earthquake, the sponge soaked in wine/vinegar; the cry of dereliction; the significance of the rebels/thieves, the mockery of the soldiers and the leaders, and of the people.

But it is to the words at the end of the account that I turn our attention. Another well-known feature of the story is the confession of the Centurion, “Surely this man was the Son of God.”

In the movie, “The Greatest Story Ever Told,” this unnamed soldier was played by John Wayne, of all people, so it must not be considered an insignificant part of the story, nor has it been under-appreciated all these years. But it has, I believe, been seen as a vindication or sorts; that at the end of the story one of the Gentiles was led to say such a thing, which vindicates the followers of Jesus in their convictions about the meaning of this death. There is some validity to this understanding.

But the confession plays another part in the story as well. It raises the stakes by making the crucifixion transcendent in the sense that it rises above the historical circumstances in which it happened with *this* world’s concerns; about the Roman justice system or about the Romans themselves and what they were doing in Jerusalem; or about Judaism and its leaders and what role they played, about whatever political, religious, economic and social ramifications might

result from it. It rises above our historical circumstances as well.

In the story we are led to the foot of the cross and compelled to think about another kind of significance altogether. Jesus was *not* just another victim of capital punishment, or the corruptions of power, or the all-too-common vicissitudes of earthy life which often seem tragic and unfair. He was the representation of the divine as a response to the condition of the world. That is what it means that he is the Son of God.

It is an enigma for all believers, and even, for those who don’t believe, that one of the primary claims of the Christian faith is that this executed man is God. *It is God* hanging there on the cross. There are many other depictions of God in the religious expressions all across human cultures and in biblical faith, but this one is unique.

The idea is that when Jesus gave himself up to be executed, though he *did* save the lives of his companions in a this-worldly way, he also saved the world in a grand, transcendent way.

The crucifixion is not merely this-worldly, but it is other-worldly too; it is not mundane and temporal, but eternal and heavenly, it is not only for the circumstances then and there, or even here and now, but it stands for the great struggle of life against death, good against evil, meaning and fulfillment against emptiness and despair; for all time and for

every person. In this sense it rises above its own historical situation and addresses every situation.

Additionally, this death stood for the overcoming of the power of sin and guilt to destroy lives and make people live in perpetual anxiety. It means a liberation from all different kinds of captivities; captivities of the heart and mind, of the body, and all the captivities that come from the communities in which we live. It means for us a healing from every kind of malady, because it foreshadows an eternal healing.

This victory, this mercy, this liberation, this healing, can only come from God, and there, God hangs on the cross, the one who is called, Son of God.

This victory does not remove us from the circumstances we are in, but conquers the anxiety about them that uses up so much of our energy and time, and takes away their hold over us. Often God is pictured as a righteous and angry judge, a demanding taskmaster seeking perfection, even an aggrieved victim set out to exact revenge. But here the picture is quite different . . . it is the picture of a God in whom mercy and love have triumphed over judgement as a sacrifice that reconciles.

It is our salvation.
It is our example.
it is our life.

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