

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector Scripture: Luke 22:39-23:56

“So That You Might Live!”

Today's reading of the Gospel – the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ – begins on the night before Jesus died for us. This was a whirlwind week in which Jesus, entering Jerusalem, was exalted as King before throngs of people who waved palm branches and cried “hosanna to the king!” Just FOUR days later – we find our King about to be arrested, tried of false charges, brutally tortured, and then executed – for being guilty of ONLY ONE THING – being God's Messiah – who came to free us from the bondage of our own sins. We read through the end of chapter 23 of the Gospel of Luke to the Crucifixion – where we learn of Christ finally being recognized as a King - but recognized in mockery.

- He is given a placard, a sign above His head – on the cross declaring Him as the King of the Jews – but again it was in ridicule.
- A royal cupbearer brings King Jesus a drink – but it is a foul, cheap, sour wine – not a drink fit for a king, instead a drink for the poor.
- Jesus is given a crown – but it is mockingly, and painfully - a crown of thorns.
- Even His robes were divided - casting lots in mockery and jest.

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified –

- hung between two real criminals –
- He was killed in the cruelest of ways – **nailed to a tree!**
- Jesus was even taunted by one of those criminals – who scoffed at Him saying “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*”
- The other criminal recognized that Jesus was innocent and had done nothing wrong – and then he asked for Jesus' mercy – to be remembered when Jesus came to His kingdom.

These two criminals are a perfect example of the two ways in which people live:

- one denying Christ, making a mockery of everything that Jesus is, and what He has done;
- and the other seeking Him, acknowledging His Lordship, begging for mercy - asking for His forgiveness and wanting to spend all of eternity in His glorious presence.

Indeed – there are two ways to live:

- You can know peace in your life through a relationship with Jesus Christ
- Or you can live alone – without peace – and without Him!

Sin separates us from God. As sinners, we simply CANNOT come into His holy presence. God is holy – and because of our sin we cannot even approach His presence. If we have unrepentant sin in our hearts - we have put a wall between ourselves and God. BUT – we are not without hope! The Prophet Isaiah in the beginning of chapter 59 says “*See, the LORD's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*” (Isaiah 59:1-2)

My brothers and sisters – it is not God's desire or His intention for anyone to be apart from Him. That choice belongs to mankind! But – it is only God who can save us – only God can bridge the divide so that we can cross over to Him and be in His grace, His mercy, and His presence. The fact remains that sin has to be punished! If God left us alone, on our own devices – we would have absolutely no hope!

The reality that the price has to be paid holds true in all of our lives. The price – the cost – what we have earned - **the wages of sin has to be paid** – and we all know the importance of Romans 6:23 *“the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Oh Lord Jesus, PLEASE don't let me get what I deserve!

Since what we deserve – the wages - the price - **is death**; the price for the covering of our sins – for reconciliation or atonement is death; **that price has to be paid.**

God promised a means for someone else to pay our debt – to stand in our place - and that was to shed His own blood – for us.

All the way back in Genesis 22 – Abraham, being totally obedient to God, was leading his only son, Isaac, up the mountain that would one day be called Mt. Zion. Isaac was unknowingly carrying the wood for his sacrifice right on his back - and he asked his father: *“The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”* Abraham said, *“God **himself** will provide the lamb.”* (Genesis 22:7-8) All the way back in Genesis – God promised that He Himself would provide the lamb – He Himself – in the person of His Son – Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John reminds us that *“the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14) In verse 18 of that first chapter, John continues *“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”* **My brothers and sisters – God, Himself, provided the Lamb – to pay our debt – to clean our slate – to provide a means of forgiveness and reconciliation with Him!** There is nothing that you have done in your life that cannot be covered by the blood of Jesus Christ. Repentance is complete in Him, forgiveness is complete in Him.

How many Sunday's have you worshipped – and during Eucharistic Prayer A – have you heard and seen the priest pray “He stretched out His arms upon the cross – and offered HIMSELF – a perfect sacrifice for the whole world?”

- That is why we celebrate today.
- That is why we thank Almighty God for Jesus' birth – His Incarnation.
- That is why we recall His death, Resurrection, and Ascension.
- Jesus is indeed Christ the King – the one who paid our price – and died **in our place**, Jesus - Himself – born once – so that we might live!

Everybody loves the baby in the manger – the Christmas songs, the presents, the star, the shepherds, the angels, the wise men – the gold, the frankincense, and the myrrh. But not everyone loves what that represents - because that is only the beginning of the story. In order for salvation to come to humanity –

- there has to be a Good Friday –
- there has to be a trial -
- there has to be a scourging,
- there has to be a crown of thorns,
- there has to be nails that painfully puncture that precious skin,
- and there has to be a cross.

There are some people who have a difficult time understanding or even believing in a Savior who convicts us as sinners, asking us to repent and be transformed by His love. There are some people who only hear what Jesus said in the very midst of today's Gospel in Luke 23:34 *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* These people unfortunately go on thinking that Jesus was letting the world off the hook – because of ignorance! No, my

friends, instead, Jesus was asking for forgiveness in order to give us the opportunity to make the choice for ourselves – which way we would live. The question is this:

Do we want to live:

- in sin; separated from Almighty God?
- or forgiven – washed clean by His blood – and the sacrifice that He made? *“So that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* (John 3:16)

Jesus asked for forgiveness – so that you might live!

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians 1:15-20 reminds us of the person and character of Jesus who *“is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”*

In today’s Epistle reading – Paul gives us deeper insight into the character and sacrifice of Jesus Christ: *“although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:6-8)

My brothers and sisters in Christ, as we begin this Holy Week - take with you today a plan and a promise:

- Plan your life to be about learning and worshipping the Lamb of God who took your place on the Cross;
- Plan your life to be about preparing to join Him when He comes again; and
- Plan your life to be about living the message of forgiveness and love that can only be found in Him – sharing the Gospel, the Good News of that message in everything we think, do and say. Please be a consistent Christian – showing and telling others what Christ, the compassionate King did for you
- And most importantly - accept His promise of eternal life – so that you might live!

