

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Luke 23:32-37, 44-47

Sermon Title: "There Will Be Conversions" (The Supporting Cast of Lent: The Roman Soldiers)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

March 27, 2011

We have two separate yet interesting situations before us. Both deal with Roman soldiers who are eyewitnesses to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The first situation involves soldiers dividing Jesus' clothing after he is nailed to the cross. We are familiar with the scene, because we read about it every Lent: Roman soldiers trip over each other in trying to get a garment or two from Jesus. They seem like a pack of wolves growling at each other, trying to get the best scraps. According to one minister and biblical scholar, every Jew wore five different articles of clothing: the inner tunic, the outer robe, the girdle, the sandals, and the turban.¹ The outer robe is the grand prize. It is woven as one piece without a seam, a highly-favored garment. This is what the soldiers want, so they cast lots to see who gets it. They do something similar to throwing dice, and the one with the best numbers wins.

Jesus dying on the cross means nothing to these

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 297.

soldiers. They have seen it all before – they have executed many people over their careers. They have executed fellow Roman citizens who committed crimes against the state, and they have executed many Jews in the region who thought they could fight against Roman occupation. Jesus is another Jew to these men, and he must have done something or other wrong to deserve his fate.

At one point the soldiers decide to mock Jesus on the cross. They have probably done this before, too. They may have taken pleasure in watching another human being die, struggling to get comfortable as the sun beats down on their unprotected bodies and as the splinters of wood dig deeply into their backs. They probably yelled at criminals before, shouting, “Hey, why don’t you get yourself down? If you do, you could have your clothes back. I’m sure the governor would pardon you.” These jeers would be followed by a chorus of laughter from the other soldiers. They might have added wheezing and heavy breathing sounds to mock the criminals, as they struggled for breath. This time, the soldiers discover that Jesus is the King of the Jews. This makes the soldiers mock him even harder. “Hey King, save yourself! If you are so powerful, more powerful than the great Caesar in Rome, then come off that cross! Show us what kind of leader you are!” Again, a chorus of laughter follows. They offer sour

wine to Jesus to further mock him.

The soldiers show great contempt toward Jesus, as he suffers. By dividing up his clothes, they assume Jesus is a dead man before he is dead, and the most disrespectful thing you could do to a dead man is check his pockets for loose change, so to speak. By mocking him as the King, they have no regard for him as a great Teacher of Israel, or even as the Savior of the world.

But this attitude of the soldiers seems to change over time. It may have started with Jesus' first prayer to God the Father, "Forgive them, for they do not know what they do." That prayer might have struck a chord within the soldiers. And then there is the compassion he shows toward one of the other criminals dying next to him. The criminal asks for heaven to be his reward, and Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be in paradise with me."² And then there is the compassion Jesus shows to John and Mary, his disciple and his mother. He gives each to the other's care by calling John her son, and by calling Mary his mother.³

And then there is the way Jesus dies. Although it is midday, the sky turns as dark as night for three

² Cf. Luke 23:39-43.

³ Cf. John 19:25-27.

hours. The veil in the temple in Jerusalem rips in two, causing a great commotion. Jesus cries in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” and he breathes his last. During this whole time, the soldiers are present. They see and hear everything Jesus is doing. As they observe him, they notice that he is not dying like other criminals. Others would complain and cry in agony. Others would yell at the soldiers below, calling them all sorts of names. Others would plead for the soldiers to kill them, so they could escape their suffering on their crosses. Jesus does none of these things. He shows no anger or hatred, but compassion and mercy. Even as he dies, the soldiers see this man is not just another Jew. There is something special about him.

One of those soldiers is so awestruck by the experience that he gives glory to God the Father, and exclaims, “Certainly this was a righteous Man.” The Gospel of Matthew has the Roman soldier saying, “Surely, he was the Son of God.”⁴

This was just a fluke, right? This Jesus guy just happened to be different than all the other criminals that hung on crosses. He was different. Jesus knew his destiny to die on a cross. He knew his place with God the Father and with the world: to satisfy God’s

⁴ Cf. Luke 23:47 and Matthew 27:54.

anger with sinful humans and to raise those humans to everlasting life. The centurion who exclaimed Jesus to be a good man, to be the Son of Man, was a hardened man himself. All the soldiers standing near the cross had years of training and experience as well-organized military men of the vast Roman Empire. They were not easily swayed by tears or pleas for help or anything else. However, Jesus' death seemed to have gotten to them, gotten to them so they might think Jesus was Somebody special.

The centurion's exclamation reminds us of the Wise Men visiting Jesus when he was a baby lying in a manger.⁵ The word of God reached those Gentile Magi, and caused them to take notice, and they had to follow a star to see for themselves who the real Star was. Christ touches people hearts and they take notice. They want to know more.

When my family and I were visiting Tamara's parents in California, we went to the San Marino Community Presbyterian Church for Sunday worship. It was fun to think at the time we were starting worship there, y'all were finishing worship here. In the middle of the service, a bunch of people came up front in order to join the church. They were of different ages, different heights, different backgrounds. Some

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, 1063.

grew up in CA, but others grew up somewhere else, in particular a Chinese student who was studying at one of the local university. The young man grew up in China, got his high school education in England, made it to CA somehow, and wanted to join a Presbyterian church of all things. I was fascinated by his life and travels, but I was also fascinated by how he came from a Communist country with values from Confucius, and ended up becoming a Christian. He must have heard about Jesus from a missionary or two. Those words must have touched his life in some way, so that he would want to follow Christ as his Savior. Christ helped him to break away from the traditions of his family and country, and now Christ has a claim on his life.

I remember reading a newsletter from Presbyterian missionaries in India, and they talked about how the word of God is touching many lives. We may know India for its caste system. There are people who have a higher social status than others, and they judge people according to how smart or how sociable they are. At the bottom of this system are the Untouchables. In fact, they are so low that they fall outside the caste system itself. They suffer social segregation, poverty, and ill-health. Nobody wants them around – they are treated like homeless dogs.

These are the ones who are hearing the word of God, and finding it changing their lives. These Presbyterian missionaries spend time with people who get no attention from anybody, and they are told that there is a God who loves them, that there is a God who sent his Son to die for them, and that they are special in the Creator's sight. That preaches. Many unwanted people find that God wants them, and so they are becoming Christians and praising the Father for his Son's great sacrifice.

Chuck Colson was once the Special counsel to President Nixon. He was known as Nixon's hatchet man, because, in his words, he was valuable to the President, willing to be ruthless in getting things done. Colson was a powerful man in a powerful position. And then the Watergate scandal broke out. And then Colson and others were sent to jail for voting fraud and conspiring to cover it up. In jail he discovered quickly that his power could not save him. His political connections were severed, and he had nobody to turn to. Colson knew a certain chairman of the board of a large company, and that chairman was a Christian, and he gave Colson a book from C.S. Lewis called *Mere Christianity*. The book changed Colson's life. He began to lean on the power of God, and he joined prayer groups, and started a prison ministry to

spread Christ's word to more people. We may know Chuck Colson now as one of the renowned leaders for Jesus Christ.

"This man certain was a good man. He certainly was the Son of Man." These are not light words spoken. They aren't said just to say them. These words come from a centurion who watched Jesus, who heard Jesus. He stayed to the bitter end just as he always did, but instead he witnessed the miracle of the world. With Jesus' death came the end of sin. With his death came an open door once again to God the Father. The centurion saw it all, and he was touched to his very core, and he had to praise God for it. It would be no wonder if the other soldiers did the same.

"Where Christ is seen and heard there will be conversions."⁶ Christ is irresistible. There is no getting around his love, which is poured out to all. There is no ignoring his grace, which erases the deepest sin. There is no walking away from his salvation, when a person hears that he or she can have a better life with God both now and forever.

The Word of God affects princes and paupers, the strong and the weak, the young and the old. We have seen it ourselves: We are greatly affected by Christ in many ways, so that we have dedicated our lives to

⁶ Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2*, 1063.

serving him. We see how others are affected by Christ. A person might not say he or she is a Christian, but when talking about his love and life people will enter the conversation. They will want to know more, because the prospect of having Christ as Savior is enticing. We would hope such conversations would lead to conversions, and if the Holy Spirit has his way people will soon bow down and worship.

Jesus Christ, on the cross, affected soldiers and onlookers and priests and politicians. They all knew they stood in the presence of Somebody that was more than the King of the Jews. He was more than a so-called criminal dying on trumped-up charges. A soldier professed this Man to be the Son of Man, righteous in every way. A conversion occurred, and they will occur when people see and hear about Jesus.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: God's mercy is poured out like a mighty river. God's grace flows like a never-ending stream. Whatever we have done and whatever we have failed to do are washed away. We are made clean. We are raised up. We are forgiven and set free in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God, amen.