

Wednesday Lent 2024

Luke 23:26-34

God on Trial: Sympathy

Luke 23:26-34 (EHV)

As they led him away, they seized Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country. They placed the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large crowd of people was following him, including women who were mourning and wailing for him. ²⁸Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹Be sure of this: The days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never gave birth, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹For if they do these things to the green wood, what will happen to the dry?”

³²*Two other men, who were criminals, were led away with Jesus to be executed.*

³³*When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left.*

³⁴*Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

They cast lots to divide his garments among them.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I read most of my news stories online now. I tend to read those stories that have some religious angle to them and once in a great while I also read the comments after the story. If the story portrays Christianity in a positive way, you can count on the comments to attack and mock Christians and Christ. You can also count on some Christians to gloat and brag about how much better their religious philosophy is than the atheists or followers of other religions. On the other hand, if the news article points out some negative things happening within visible Christianity, you can count on comments from non-Christians about how all Christians are hypocrites who talk about love but really hate others. And there are Christians who attempt to defend the faith with little love and compassion evident in their comments.

There is a reason I rarely read the comments. There is so much negativity and very little truth about Christ and the Bible from either side of the so-called discussion. If I consumed a steady diet of such comments and especially if I engaged in these discussions, I would be in danger of becoming bitter and angry against those who say mean things about Jesus and about me as a follower of Jesus. It would become difficult to have much sympathy for those who deny that Jesus is God’s Son. It would become difficult to have much compassion for those who mock Jesus as a fraud and his followers as those who believe fairy tales.

However, in our sinful nature we kind of like being angry. We like having a clear enemy. We might even enjoy being the victim. Everyone is against me. Woe is me. I’m so oppressed. It’s so hard being a Christian. People say mean things about me. When we fall into this kind of thinking, we are only thinking about ourselves. We are not thinking about the other person. We only care about how we feel and how what that person said or did affects us. Very little sympathy or compassion is being shown when we are in such a self-centered mindset. We might tell ourselves that we are righteously angry because “those people” are saying blasphemous things about Jesus Christ. Maybe, but often it is because we are self-centered and angry because we don’t like mean things said about us.

If anyone had the right to be angry about his treatment by others, it is Christ himself. The sinless Son of God has done nothing to deserve the words said against him, the fists smashed into him, the crown of thorns beat into his head, the whip tearing into his back, or the nails driven through

his hands and feet. Yet, his thoughts are not focused upon himself. Even as he is unable to carry the cross any further, his thoughts are for others. While the women rightly weep and wail when they see the suffering of Jesus, Christ himself has compassion on them. He thinks of the terrible suffering many in Jerusalem will experience in the near future. The Romans are crucifying one innocent man this day. They will massacre many in Jerusalem in forty years, destroying the city and tearing down the temple so that not one stone is left upon another. Jesus has sympathy and compassion for the women and children who would experience that terrible time.

Even when the soldiers have fastened his hands and feet to the cross with the nails and lifted him up for all to see, Jesus is not focused on himself. He is not plotting revenge. He does not issue any threats. Instead, he speaks these amazing words from the cross: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Them is the soldiers. These soldiers on execution duty could not afford to have any sympathy or compassion on the condemned man. They were to inflict pain and suffering. The soldiers were to make the condemned man an example to everyone who walked by. You will suffer a terrible death if you dare to go against the Roman government. Jesus asks his Father to forgive these cruel soldiers. Since those crucified would not be needing their clothing anymore, the soldiers received the clothing as a bonus for carrying out the execution. While they wait for Jesus to die, they divide up his clothing among them by casting lots. They care nothing for the men they have just crucified. But Jesus cares for them. He wants them to be forgiven. He wants his Father to apply the payment for sins he is currently making by his suffering and death to the soldiers responsible for his suffering and death. The compassion of Christ has no equal.

Jesus had compassion for the women, for his disciples, for his mother, and for the soldiers. His compassion extends to the whole world, to all who have sinned against the Lord. Instead of treating us as the enemies we were, he died for us to save us from sin and eternal death. Instead of seeking revenge on sinners, Jesus sacrificed himself to rescue sinners.

Thanks be to God the Holy Spirit for converting us from enemies of God to children of God by his wonderful gospel. Thanks be to God the Son for paying the full price to forgive us while we were still sinners. Thanks be to God the Father for accepting Christ’s payment and therefore forgiving us just as Jesus desires.

Now, we pray for our Triune God to work in us the same kind of compassion and sympathy for others that Jesus has. Give us compassion for those who mock us for our faith in Christ. Give us sympathy for those who make laws that make it more difficult to live as a Christian in society. Give Christians throughout the world compassion for those who wish to harm them. We pray for God to help us see everyone in this world as someone for whom Christ suffered and died. Everyone in this world is someone Christ wants to receive the forgiveness and eternal life he purchased for all at the cross and empty tomb.

The apostle Paul experienced both sides of persecution. First as the one inflicting suffering and even death upon believers. Next, as the believer who was spoken against, arrested, beaten and more. In his letter to the believers in Rome, he urges us: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). For our anger does not show Christ to people. Instead, moved by the compassion of Christ for us, we live at peace and show compassion to others, even to those who oppose Christ now. For Christ wants them to be forgiven and receive eternal life and because of Jesus’ love for us, we want the same thing.

Amen.