

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

Sermon for November 20, 2022

KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH

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Summary: And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free

In our gospel reading for today, we find Luke's account of the final hours of Christ's life, the hours he spent on the cross. Luke's account of those final hours differs in a few respects from the accounts we have from the other gospel writers, and one of those differences is that, whereas the other writers note that two others were crucified along with Jesus, Luke's is the only account that records what the other two said, and what Jesus said to one of them.

It's interesting to think about how Luke may have gotten his special information about these exchanges. Obviously they were from someone standing nearby, who overheard them, and who later communicated them to Luke. We don't know for sure who that was, but my own guess is that it might have been the man called Simon, who helped carry Jesus' cross part of the way to Calvary, when it became too heavy for Jesus to bear alone.

Luke's gospel is also the only gospel to tell us about that. You'll remember that Simon was a fellow from North Africa who happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and he happened to be standing in the crowd as the Roman soldiers accompanying Jesus marched by, and they dragooned him into helping. We happen to have good reason from other early Christian writings to think that this Simon and his two sons went on to become important figures in the early church. It is certainly not difficult to imagine that this man, who was probably in Jerusalem just as a Passover tourist, might have carried that cross to the place of

crucifixion, and remained there while the young preacher from Galilee was nailed to the cross, and stayed nearby as the terrible events of the next few hours ran their course, standing close enough to hear the two thieves and Jesus as they hung on their crosses.. It's even possible to imagine that it was that very experience that changed Simon's life.

We'll never know. But what we do know is that someone was there and heard, and what he or she heard was communicated to Luke, and Luke found what they said to be important enough that he made sure to include it in his account. And what was it that Luke found to be important?

Clearly it was the difference in their attitude towards Jesus reflected in what they said. The first thief basically taunts our Lord, expressing a cynical disbelief in his Messianic claim, while the second thief, for reasons we will never know until we can ask him in heaven one day...the second thief gives voice to some intuitive knowledge about Jesus, that he is innocent, that he has done nothing wrong to deserve this fate. And it is to that second thief that Jesus responds with the tremendous and, given the circumstances, nigh incomprehensible reassurance: "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Why does Luke make sure we have a record of that exchange on the cross? Earlier in his account, Luke also mentions something Jesus said that none of the other gospel writers were aware of. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And I think that may give us the answer we're looking for. The final lesson Jesus offers in these few words from the cross is the same fundamental lesson he's been offering throughout his ministry. The lesson that was so difficult to accept that it created enemies who brought him to the cross. And the same lesson that is just as difficult to accept today as it was then. And what is that lesson?

The lesson is that human failure in matters of the spirit is due to ignorance, ignorance of the truth, and that the remedy for that spiritual failure, its only remedy, is to become acquainted with the truth.

That's exactly what Jesus has said before. In the 8th chapter of John's gospel, John records Jesus saying this: *and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*. Free from what? Free from all the sins of the spirit: from pride, from greed, from envy, from resentment, and so on and on. The remedy for spiritual failure is not punishment, but knowledge.

And now we begin to sense why this lesson is so hard to accept.

We can all testify, I think, to an exceptionally deep temptation to criticize, to find fault with others. Whether it's our in-laws or our unfriendly neighbors or the car salesman or the lazy bums on welfare or the baby-killing abortionists or the vulture capitalists or the power hungry Democrats or the Nazis or the Communists or the Islamists or Venezuelan gangs or the people who shoot up schools or the cheaters on workman's compensation or the bullies in school or the blankety-blank guy tailgating you or the unfriendly neighbor or our snobbish in-laws...in all these cases and countless more, we find in others, not just shortcomings, but faults, moral faults, something we can feel justified in blaming them for. In ninety-nine percent of the cases, we have no tendency whatsoever to attribute their behavior to ignorance. Ignorance is too...innocent. We want to blame, not to excuse.

And that's why I say that this particular teaching is so hard, for all of us.

Of course, the ignorance, the lack of knowledge that lies at the heart of our sinful humanity is not what we normally understand by ignorance. It's not a lack of information or a lack of instruction. It's not the truths of geometry or economics or auto mechanics or quantum physics. Then what is it? What does this knowledge consist of, what *is* this truth the knowledge of which will set us free?

In John's 14th chapter, John records Jesus giving us the answer to that question as well. Jesus says: *I am the way, the truth, and the life.* And there's your answer. It's the knowledge of Christ that sets you free. And it's not knowledge about him, it's knowledge of him, it's knowing him ... as you know your best friend ... it's being acquainted with him.

St. Paul expresses the centrality of this acquaintanceship with Christ most elegantly in his letter to the Philippians:

⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection...

The cure for human failure is knowing Jesus. Sounds simple, doesn't it? I wish it were. I wish I could speak from experience and tell you what it's like to

truly *know* Jesus. But I find the same spirit of criticism and blame and condemnation in my own heart, and what that means is that I haven't found that freedom, that perfect freedom from bitterness and indignation and self-righteous anger that Jesus offers as its reward. Heaven, I suspect, is the place where we will really begin to know Jesus in his full reality, and if what Jesus has told us is true, then in heaven we will know the truth, and that acquaintance will liberate us from the bitterness and bile of unforgiveness. But in the meantime, we still remain under the instruction, to try to treat the misbehavior of others the way we treat the failures of children, as products of ignorance.

Our consolation – or at least mine – is twofold. The first is that we have assurance from St. Paul that the knowledge we're talking about is not either/or, it's a process, a journey, perhaps an endless journey, of coming to know him better and better. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes:

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. (vv 15-16)

And the second consolation, the far greater consolation, is that Jesus Himself, in his final great prayer on the last night of his life, recorded for us in John's 17th chapter...Jesus himself prays that we may have that knowledge that is itself the life of heaven:

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: *“Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, ² as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He ^[a] should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is an echo of that prayer, that you cure us of blindness, to the extent that can be accomplished within this mortal coil. Help us to see evil for what it is, just ignorance of You. Help us to pity rather than hate those who go astray. Help us to recognize the ignorance in ourselves, the ignorance that leads us to hate our enemies rather than their own blindness. Help us to see the world with boundless sympathy and unending mercy, the way Jesus sees it, and we ask this in his name.

