

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”

³⁶ *The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”*

³⁸ *There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

³⁹ *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

⁴⁰ *But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*

⁴² *Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

⁴³ *Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:35-43)*

Can You See the Glory Here?

All the studies prove it: appearance matters. Beautiful people have an advantage in life. One study that said that for a man, every inch of height (up to a certain point) means a 1.8% increase in salary. Another study indicated that taller men are far more likely to marry and have children – so height means that you get the girl. Many studies have shown that better looking executives make more money and better looking candidates get elected. I wonder if it has anything to do with the state of politics in America today. Abraham Lincoln was famously ugly. He himself joked about it many times. Not only was his face was craggy and dark, he was freakishly tall for his time and he rarely could find clothes that fit him properly. His contemporaries remarked on how awkward he looked when he moved. Yet, somehow this ugly, awkward looking man became one of the greatest presidents in our history. Looks can be deceiving. That’s true about events, too. Today Valley Forge is a national park with a multi-million dollar visitors center. Every history of the American Revolution cites it as a moment of glory: George Washington held his army together through that horrible winter and went on to win the war. But if we had been there that winter, we would’ve seen bloody footprints in the snow because the men didn’t have shoes. We would’ve seen fever and starvation rations. It didn’t look glorious. But the glory wasn’t in the appearance, it was in what those men did in the face of adversity. Today is the same. To you and me who gather every Sunday, the cross is glorious. It’s the instrument Jesus used to win our salvation. But this morning’s reading reminds us how hard that was to see on the first Good Friday. **Can you see the glory here?**

I.

I don’t know if we in our squeaky clean age can appreciate just how gruesome crucifixion really was. If we had stood there that day and seen this blood covered, filthy man dragged out to the cross, he would not have looked like a king. But the Bible never dwells on the gore or even on the pain. It dwells on the shame. At every step of the way, Jesus was mocked and ridiculed. Luke tells us that the mockery continued at the cross. The leaders of the Jews sneered at him, **“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”** The saving probably refers to all the people Jesus had healed. But his enemies weren’t impressed. They knew Jesus claimed to be the Christ, the Savior. They thought that dying on a cross was proof that he couldn’t possibly be the one God would send. The soldiers guarding Jesus mocked him: **“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”** What kind of a king lets himself be nailed to a cross? No Roman king would let that happen to him. They enjoyed mocking this stupid Jew. Pilate put up that famous sign, **“This is the King of the Jews.”** Whatever else he thought he was accomplishing, that was a statement about who was really in charge. Even the men dying with him got in on the act. One thief said, **“Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”** It’s amazing how cruel we humans can be. It’s amazing that we can think that hurting someone else might make us feel better, even if just for a moment.

Don’t we have to admit that mockery made sense? What could anyone accomplish by dying this way? It didn’t look like a general leading a charge and winning the battle and dying in the process. It didn’t look like a hero throwing himself on a hand grenade to save his fellow soldiers. It didn’t look like the soldiers at Valley Forge suffering through the winter so that they could take the field in the spring. It looked like a criminal dying. The Romans reserved crucifixion for the worst kind of criminals, for slaves and traitors. When they

killed Christ this way, they were showing their contempt for him. And for the Jews it was even worse. The Old Testament taught that being nailed to a tree – being crucified – meant that God had abandoned you. You were on the way to hell. The Christ couldn't possibly be on his way to hell, could he?

Yes, he could. Because that's what our sin deserved. That is the miracle of the cross, a miracle that we know so well that we may not even remember to be amazed by what happened that day. The Son of God hid himself in the body of a Jewish baby. Even when he became a great teacher and spiritual leader, Jesus' glory as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords was hidden every day of his life here. Only when he did a miracle and when he proclaimed the gospel, did he give little peeks of what lay beneath his flesh and blood. The cross is when that glory was most hidden, because on the cross, Jesus did indeed suffer hell itself. God the Father abandoned him there. He plunged him into all the hell that we sinners deserve. In the hours that he was there, Jesus suffered all that our sin has coming: hell and death and pain and shame and rejection by God.

That shame is his glory, because he didn't deserve any of it. We do. The reason we deserve all that hell and death and shame is because we sin. Every day of our lives, we fall short of what God commands. He tells us love our neighbor as ourselves. We try to be nice people. But do we really love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves? Do we sacrifice ourselves, freely and joyfully, every single day, for the benefit of others? Do we spend our time and our wealth not on what we want, but on what others need? Or are we selfish? Do we constantly justify taking care of ourselves first? That's sin. And God commands us to love him with all that we are. If we did that, we would never miss an opportunity to come to church, our offerings would overflow our ability to spend them, our people would experience so much love and kindness that every hurt and problem would have dozens of hands reaching out to help. But that's not what we see. It's not what we do.

We deserve the cross, the shame, the hell, the death. But Jesus joyfully stepped into our place and took all that we deserve. He did that because he loves us. He did that so that every human being is forgiven. Because he did, our sin is gone. Because the Son of God hid his power and might in the body of a Jewish man, we will live forever. Why? First of all, because that's the only way he could have gotten to the cross. If Jesus would've revealed his glory on that first Good Friday, no one would've dared to drive nails through his hands and feet, no Jewish leader or Roman soldier or dying criminal would've dared to mock him. Even the devil himself would have fled in terror. So Jesus kept it all locked away under that human flesh so that all these horrible things could and did happen to him.

Even more than that, the Son of God hid all that he was in the flesh of the child of Mary so that his death would indeed count for all the billions of people who would ever live. His hours of hell are enough for all the hell of all the human race. His shame and his death more than cover the shame and the death that every one of us owes, because he is the Son of God. In Christ, God the Son died. In Christ, God the Son paid all that we humans owe. In Christ, Jesus became the only human being who has ever existed, so his death and his hell erase all the guilt of all mankind forever. Jesus died and he won. That made all that mocking true. He really was the King of the Jews. He really was the Christ of God, the Chosen One. He really was Christ the King. **Can you see the glory here? It's hidden in his sufferings.** But it is truly here.

II.

And even on that first Good Friday, it was possible to see it. That is the truly amazing part of this story. If you had faith, even then you could do what we do today: see Jesus for who he was and what he was doing. You could see the glory. The other thief is the example of that truth. After the first one mocked Jesus, he said, **“Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”**

Do you hear the faith in his words? Even the question, “Don't you fear God?” was a testimony of faith. To the Jews, “fear God” was the most basic way of saying “recognize him and revere him.” Now, in this case, he may even have had the idea of being afraid in mind, since this man was about to die and face God and be judged and he was attacking the very Savior God had sent to save him. And he needed saving. These two men were the kinds of criminals that the Romans crucified. They were guilty of more than just petty theft. The Bible doesn't spell out what they had done, but they were getting what they deserved. All the more reason for this man to stop and think what it meant to mock an innocent man, more than that, the promised Savior.

The other criminal recognized his Savior. He said, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** He was guilty of so much, but he trusted that Jesus would save him from hell. He saw that Jesus was indeed the King of the Jews and the promised Christ. In the last hours of his life, he repented of all that he

had been guilty of and he hung on to Jesus to take all that sin away and bring him home to heaven. How did all that happen? The truth is, we don't know. But somehow, this man had heard the gospel, even while he was a criminal. Somehow, God brought it all home to him as he suffered the horrible pain and shame of dying on a cross. Through that gospel, God gave him faith.

Many times, I've sat with Christians who have lost people they loved. Sometimes, those children or spouses or siblings or even parents didn't give a very good testimony of faith in Christ. Sometimes, they gave no confession at all. But who knows what the Holy Spirit does in the hearts of dying people who have heard the gospel again and again? This criminal's faith gives us hope in the power and the love of God. If someone has heard the good news that Jesus is their Savior, God can recover those words and bring them back to that person's heart and mind, even as they lay dying. God can still give them faith, even if they never have the chance to confess it to you and me. If the gospel has been preached, if baptism has been administered, if the power of God has been used, we can always have hope in what God is doing, even when we can't see it.

Sometimes, it can be just as amazing as what happened to this man. You know, at the moment he made his confession, none of the disciples were speaking. Most of them were hiding. Peter had denied Jesus three times. And on Easter morning, it's clear that their faith was dying. They had thought Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel, but now he was dead. But the Holy Spirit worked through the gospel and he gave faith to this man, whose whole life was now pain and waiting to die.

Even in crisis, God is there for us. Knowing the glory of Christ that is hidden in his crucifixion is knowing the power of God. The gospel, the good news that this is our Savior dying for us, is the power of God to sustain us through every sorrow and pain of this life. Jesus died because he loves us. Jesus died this death because he wants us to live with him in heaven. Jesus will not leave us, no matter how much life here hurts. Then three days later, Christ the King rose. He has the power to conquer all our hurts. Christ the King ascended into heaven. He rules all things there for our good. And he sends us this gospel to keep our faith alive and to bring us home to heaven. Every day that we are here, Christ the King shows us his glory through the word. **Can you see the glory here? It's revealed to those who have faith.**

To us who have faith, that filthy, bloody Savior is the most glorious of men. To the human eye, he looked like nothing. But to the eye of faith, he is beautiful beyond all compare. We see that he is indeed the King who rules over his people now and who will rule in heaven forever. We see that he is the Christ, the Chosen One, who laid down his life for no other reason than the love he has for us. Because he did, we will live with him forever. See that glory today and every day. Amen.