

Christ the King 2007

Of all the means of execution that man has devised for his fellow man, none is as drawn-out a process as crucifixion. It took hours between that the time the nails were driven into his hands and feet—a painful, but not of itself deadly aspect of the process—between that and the time when, struggling to lift his body as its entire weight bore down on his chest, the pain from the nails shooting through his body with each pull, the one being executed would eventually suffocate, unable to breathe as his strength left him, and he could not pull his whole body up on that cross even one more time to catch another breathe of air. An awful, cruel way to go; yet in its prolongation, it allowed some last minute business to be taken care of. On Calvary, on the cross, Jesus and the two thieves knew that their time on earth, in the life they had known, was short; but there was still time to get much, much done. For Jesus, even in the excruciating pain he was undergoing, there was time yet to forgive the people who had done this to him: those who accused him, those who sentenced him, those who drove in the nails, those who mocked him. There was time to give: to give his mother Mary to his disciple, and to give his disciple to his mother Mary, and to thereby establish her role in the nascent Church: as Mary gave up her Son, watching him breathe his last breaths, she became the mother of all the faithful. For one thief, there was time enough still to revile the man hanging next to him, to deny his divinity and to challenge his power. And for the other thief, there was time left to seek his salvation, which he found that day, and which he laid claim to by no other work than by merely humbling himself by asking for it.

In the first reading from the second book of Samuel, we are given a small portion of a critically important moment for the nation of Israel. After Saul's death, the kingdom had been divided: only the tribe of Judah chose to go with David, having recognized his intelligence, his military prowess, and his organizational skills asking him to be their king. Much of the rest of Israel, however, still resented the fall of the house of Saul, and so they gave their allegiance to Saul's house, weak though it was. In doing so, they rejected God's choice for his people, and they struggled because of it; and for seven years the kingdom remained divided. Finally, at the point where today's reading picks up, the remaining tribes of Israel approach David and say "in days past, it was you who led the Israelites out and brought them back." They finally accepted the fact that God had appointed David to shepherd the people; they finally found the humility to admit that they had been wrong for the last seven years, and came to David saying, in essence, "you should be our king." You are our flesh and blood; you are the one who led us in days past, you are the one anointed by God. They seemed to have been thinking, enough is enough. Why let our pride leave us weak and vulnerable, when all we have to do is make David our king—as he should be.

Centuries later, on a hill in Calvary, the people of Israel are called to recognize again who is their flesh and blood, who is the one leading them, who is the one anointed by God. And we see a microcosm of their thought in the two thieves: what were they thinking? The first thief didn't seem to have a particular gripe with Jesus: he didn't care about the accusation of blasphemy by the Jews, or of rebellion by the Romans. All he wanted was a reprieve from his punishment, and so he challenged Jesus, "if you are the Son of God, then get yourself down from there and get us down, too." He wanted down from the cross; nothing more. Down, so that he could return to the world and its goods and its riches; he wanted to secure a life that can never be secure, because eventually it must end, and he knew that. The other thief, the

repentant thief, recognized this worldly kingdom for what it is: as fleeting as those last minutes spent hanging there on the cross. He asks for more. He humbles himself, admits his guilt, admits Jesus' innocence, and this criminal, this petty, opportunistic man, decides to try and steal one more time; but at last, he tries to grab something of value; and makes off with it. If those two men were a microcosm of the nation at that time, I think that they stand just as much for us. We're all just basically *thieves nailed to the cross*, hanging here, struggling to hold on to the life we know, knowing that our time is running out, whether we're nine or thirty-nine or ninety-nine; we feel the lure of this world, yet if we will open our eyes to see who's there right beside us, and if we open our ears to hear his message, the lure of this world can give way to the lure of the promise of a world to come; we have all been offered a share in a kingdom, if we will only lay claim to the man who should be our king.

“If you are the Christ, then save yourself—and us.” Very often, this is man's attitude towards the Savior: if you are the Son of God, if you are all-powerful, then prove it to me—give me what I want. Give me success in business, or health, or comfort in prayer. It's the same thing that the first thief asked for: if you have the power, then don't make me live with the consequences of my choices, don't make me live with the results of the original sin, results which have plagued mankind since early on in his existence. Get me out of this mess, but at the same time, let me return to more of the same. The attitude goes beyond that of merely rejecting Jesus as king, it's pretty much having the audacity to ask him to hand the crown which is rightfully his over to us—if you are king, then do as **I** say. The repentant thief, at last, recognizes the folly in this approach. We have sinned—Jesus hasn't. We earned the punishments, both temporal and eternal—Jesus didn't. This is a logical consequences of the choices made by man in general, and each sinner in particular—Jesus' punishment did not fit nor follow his actions. The cross for the thief is a consequence; for Jesus, it's a sacrifice.

Just as the Israelites looked at the evidence, looked at history, gave some serious thought to what served their ultimate best interests and decided that David should indeed be their king, so now are we confronted with evidence, and witnesses, and testimony, and miracles; we've received the graces, experienced the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and known the power of prayer. The evidence is there, if we will study it, and truly consider it. Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, he made peace through the blood of his cross.” Why should we love him, obey him, worship him, follow him? One: Because of who he is—the eternal Son of the eternal Father, one only God with the Holy Spirit; Two: because of what he's done—dying on the cross to save us from our sins, and gain for us a share in his own life; and three: because of where he can take us—to his kingdom of heaven. As the minutes of our lives, be they many or few, continue to count down, we should remember that we're not coming closer to the end of the temporal, but closer to the beginning of the eternal. There is still time to determine our eternal lot; may we not only choose, but make a habit of choosing, life in Christ Jesus; as the Israelites finally did David, and as the repentant thief finally did with our Lord, may we approach life in such a way that our thoughts, words, and actions all say to Christ: you are the one God sent to save us, to lead me, and to instruct us; you should be my king.