
Meditation on Luke 23:33-43

'Face to Face with Jesus | Scoffers on a Hill'

*Grace to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [Phil 1,2] Amen.*

∴ ONE ∴

Dear sisters and brothers,

We have reached the end of this liturgical year.
Today is Reign of Christ Sunday.

Next week will be the start of the new liturgical year with the 1st Sunday of Advent, when we celebrate the coming of Christ.

In order to fully understand who he is, the one to come, today we are focusing on the reigning Christ in his eternal kingdom.

Yet, it might seem that with the biblical text we're diving into today, we might feel like we've just reached Good Friday.

But to understand the One coming, we need to realize the uniqueness of the kingdom of Christ.

::: TWO :::

Listen to verses from the gospel of Luke, chapter 23:

³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

*³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders **scoffed** at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"*

Isn't it hard to stand? This cruel contrast:

Scoffers on this hill called 'Skull' face to face with Jesus on the cross—while he is praying to his father, pleading him to forgive them.

They challenge him to proof his power, while he uses all his power to establish a relationship of his Father to them.

Yes, he saved others—and while they ask him to save himself, with his mere last breaths he is trying to save them.

But they have no eyes to see and ears to hear.

::: THREE :::

*³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the **King of the Jews**, save yourself!"*

*³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the **King of the Jews**."*

The scoffing goes on, extends.

The soldiers act like servants to the king on the cross. Offering him sour wine—their usual beverage.

They take the mocking one step further. Not only do they scoff at Jesus, they also mock at his people—who also already scoff at him.

How absurd a situation.

::: FOUR :::

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

It is hard to believe. But even one of those who are closest face to face with Jesus, one who shares the same fate, *also* scoffs at Jesus.

And moreover, ridiculously asking Jesus for salvation although he, this criminal, suffers his death penalty as a result of his wrongdoings.

In his final hour Jesus is surrounded by all these scoffers on the hill called 'Skull'—deprived of all his humanity, socially ostracized to the core.

∴ FIVE ∴

However, one different voice can be heard:

⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him [the first criminal], saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Some say that this is the first Christian sermon.

Rev. Dr. Derek Weber writes:

“It was not a long sermon, but a sermon, nonetheless. [...] here is the first one who realized that Jesus, the man dying on a cross, was the Messiah because he was dying in innocence.”

“What is amazing is what [the criminal] didn't ask for. He didn't ask for rescue.

“Get me down, get us down!” That is what was expected, and what the other asked.

But this one asked to be remembered. “Remember me. When you get where you are going, remember me.” That's all.

Don't let my life be summed up by this death. Remember me as the one who recognized you.

Remember me as someone who was more than the sum of his sins. Remember me.” That's what he asked for.”ⁱ

::: SIX :::

⁴³ [Jesus] replied, "Truly I tell you, **today** you will be with me **in Paradise.**"

With words of Derek Weber:

“Eternity is not about a place; it is about a person. It is about a relationship. And when Jesus spoke those words [...] dying on a cross, he meant right now, right then.

Paradise for that man was nothing like a green field or garden of delights; it was a cross that was robbing him of life.

And yet in that moment, he found life, abundant and full life. Paradise begins when we enter into a relationship with Jesus.

Eternity starts now, not just when we die, but right now when we reach out for the nail-scarred hand and realize that we are not alone.

We [declare] obedience to the king, the one dying on a cross and risen from the grave.ⁱⁱ

::: SEVEN :::

This IS the king we are face to face with, even today in our time, in our place—right where we live.

Did we understand, did we fully grasp that eternity starts in our relationship with Jesus?

There might be situations, in school, at work, with neighbours and even family, when we get scoffed at because we believe in this king who seems so unable to rescue himself...

People might laugh because our king's salvation, the salvation we believe in, is not about miraculously overcoming all threatening and evil situations.

Our strength and salvation is indestructibly founded in this king who in the hour of his death establishes eternal life for the one who only wishes to be kept united with him.

What a message:

Jesus says, 'You belong to me—and nothing will ever draw you from my hand'. The Paradise is yours, now and forevermore.

What a king who does not ask his servants to give their lives for him—but gives *his* life so that they will live.

And not does he only call us servants—no, he makes us his sisters and brother.

To this king, our brother we belong, now and forever. ::: Amen.

ⁱ See: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/face-to-face-with-jesus/reign-of-christ-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/reign-of-christ-year-c-preaching-notes> (2022-11-19)

ⁱⁱ Ibid.