

The Forgiving King - April 3, 2015
By Wayne J Schneider - Soli Deo Glori

The Forgiving King St. Luke 23 :32-43

Quite a while ago, there was a group of parents in our living room when the topic of Middle School came up. Someone shared how he felt about HIS daughter starting middle school and it terrified him. He said, "I would never willingly send my child to, like, Iraq ... Why would I want to send her to Middle School, that is basically the emotional equivalent of a war zone?" The group sat there and recalled our own painful experiences from that age in our lives.

That night as we sat together . . . grown adults who could barely speak the derisive nicknames and insults, that were tailor made for us by our peers, like verbal garments for us to wear. Or, just as painfully, perhaps, the ones we made for others to wear. The socially Darwinistic environment of Middle School seems to create this ability to emotionally eviscerate each other through insult. And the wounds don't go away. Not entirely.

So, in this age we find ourselves in, where bullying is finally, finally, finally being addressed, it's interesting that the gospel text for tonight is one in which Jesus himself is being derided, mocked and taunted. Mocked and killed.

All the taunting of his final day came from the fact that he would not defend himself. No genuine Messiah would go and get himself killed in a totally preventable way. Yet, Jesus would not take an eye for an eye position, he would not call 10,000 angels as the old gospel hymn says. He would not do any of the things that a self-respecting messiah would do.

I mean, during his ministry people had seen what he could pull off. Healing others, feeding others, providing huge vats of wine out of water for others- with those kinds of powers and a little more self-esteem? .. man ... Jesus could have had it all, "save yourself' they chanted. And if the taunts of the crowd have a familiar ring there's a reason - remember when Jesus had been fasting in the wilderness - another voice saying to him, If you really are the son of man tum these stone to bread ... if you really are the son of God then throw yourself down from the top of the temple and have angels catch you.

At the very beginning of Jesus ministry Satan tried this same thing and it didn't

work so, as St. Luke 4: 13 says when the devil had finished every test he departed from Jesus until an opportune time. Like the day of his death.

The leaders, the first thief, the crowds, the soldiers ... they all mocked Jesus as though to say "Obviously you 're not the son of God, because the God we know is powerful and vengeful, and slightly insecure, and would never allow himself to take this level of insult. The crowds made some fairly reasonable suggestions for what a genuine Messiah might do in a situation like his own crucifixion. Satan made a few "Messiah makeover" suggestions himself - feed yourself- do some tricks show off your skills.

Everyone thinks God should do what we would do if we were God. And then we judge God according to how we think God is doing with that. And hey, I'd love to clean Jesus up a bit so he'd at least be presentable in public, but as one of my favorite theologians, Louis Smedes, says "God is simply not a being who can be manipulated by our opinions"

We'd love God to be the King of our particular value system. But here's the thing - most of God is unknowable. Period. Yet when it comes down to it, the most reliable way to legitimately know anything at all about the nature of God, is to look to how God chose to reveal God's self in Jesus. And most notably we see who God is in how God chose to reveal God's self on the cross.

And just to be clear: The cross is not about God *'as divine child abuser, sadly sending his little boy off to be killed because we were bad and well, somebody had to pay.'* Because the irony about viewing the cross this way, is that, instead, the whole thing was about God saying "Pay attention - don't avert your eyes from the cross. This is the logical end of your value system. Here is where it will always end. In the suffering of God. Here is the extent I will go, says God, to defy your idea of me as a vengeful God. If you think I am about smiting your enemies then think again, for I will not lift even a finger to condemn those who hung me. I will simply not be known as the God of vengeance. I will not allow you to project your puffed up human traits on me, as though I'm a bigger, better version of the best parts of you or a bigger, badder version of the worst parts of you

On the cross we see God. The Word made flesh hangs from the cross. And let there be no mistake - this is Christ the King. And while his scornful and shameful death is insulting to our idea of a king and a God, the divine royalty of Christ is simply unassailable. By us or anyone else. Because sometimes things are so holy that they cannot be desecrated, try as we might.

In the previous chapter of St. Luke's gospel, as Jesus sits at table sharing his last supper with his friends, they break out in an argument over who will be the greatest. Jesus says "the greatest of you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves ... " I confer on you says Jesus to his faltering friends, "*I confer on you a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel*".

Even Jesus speaks of his kingdom and of thrones and judgment. Today we see our king enthroned, yet the throne is not one of gold and jewel, but of blood and puke-stained wood, and the crown is not one of gold and jewel but of twisted thorn. And as his crown is piercing his brow it is from here the King of Glory judges the world that put him on a cross. From his rough hewn throne of a cross Jesus looks at the world ... those who betrayed him, those who executed him, those who loved him and those who ignored him, and Jesus forgives it all.

The pronouncement is made and the judgment is *forgiveness*. "Forgive them Father for they know not what they are doing" is, as a friend reminded me this week, an eternally valid statement. From his cross Christ the King loves the betrayer, the violent, the God-killer in all of us. Because God's divine self was unmockable, protected and apart, and unchanged by our opinions and value systems.

And it finally is only a God who enters our human existence, and suffers our insults with only love and forgiveness, who can save us from ourselves. It is only a self-emptying God who walked among as Christ Jesus, who, in the words of St Paul, "*though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, humbled himself to the point of death- even death on a cross.*"

There, in that self-emptying, we see the image of God. There on the cross we receive the blessedness of God's own self poured out for us. And the *imago dei*, the image of this very God is within you, and is also that which cannot be profaned. Cannot be insulted. Cannot be mocked. Cannot be injured. For you are children of a crucified king. Alleluia. Amen.