

6th Wed in Lent (3/20/24)

Luke 23:26-34 - As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then ""they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"" ³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" ³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Dear sufferers with Jesus:

Fewer than two-thirds of Americans are now Christians. That's down from three-fourths just ten years ago. In approximately one more generation, we'll be in the minority. Our youth are almost in the minority already among their peers. The non-Christian portion of the population doesn't have a favorable view of us either. They're more likely to describe us as misogynistic, racist, and invasive than generous, friendly, and caring.

These are just the stats. What about the stories? A middle schooler is shamed by his teacher in front of the class for saying he believes God created the world. A woman loses her job for refusing to go along with immoral or unethical behavior. Students and teachers are targeted by a shooter because they are Christian. You've heard the stories. You may have one or two of your own. And we haven't yet mentioned the funny looks, barbed comments, and cold shoulders we get from unbelievers all the time. We poor Christians!

Should we look for pity? We won't get it from the world. Many people are happy to see that Christianity's cultural influence is fading, glad to see us Christians put back in our place. "Poor Christians!" Is that what we should say?

Is that what Jesus would say? Jesus sure makes for a sympathetic figure on his way out to Golgotha. Actually, *pathetic* might be the better word. His back is shredded from scourging. His face must be bruised purple from the beatings he's taken before the Jewish leaders, Herod, and Pilate. Blood drips from the thorns in his scalp. After a night without sleep but with constant abuse, he's exhausted. His body crumbles under the weight of his cross, so the soldiers conscript someone from the crowd to carry it.

No wonder the women mourned and wailed! This group of people following behind Jesus may have been believers—or simply citizens of Jerusalem drawn to the crowd and following the morning's events—who burst into tears at the sight of a human being treated so brutally.

But what does Jesus say? "Don't cry for me! No sympathy for me, please. Mourn for yourselves and your children!" In fact, just five days earlier, Jesus himself had wept over the people of Jerusalem. Because they rejected the Messiah, they would experience God's judgment. The time was coming when mothers would rather be childless than have to watch their children suffer. People would prefer to be crushed to death by a mountain than be starved, tortured, or captured by their enemies. And history records the horrific things that happened to mothers and children when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem a generation later, things too terrible to recount in this sermon.

Jesus uses a proverb in his warning, "*If people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?*" He seems to be saying that if he, the innocent one, was tortured and put to death, how much more properly could the sinful inhabitants of Jerusalem expect to suffer and die? Maybe we could turn this toward ourselves. If Jesus, the perfect Son of God, was put on trial and suffered, why would we sinners be surprised when the same happens to us?

When we hear about the decline of Christianity in this country, when we read about society moving away from godly values, or when we feel the sting of rejection or mockery, our natural reaction is to think of ourselves as victims in need of sympathy. But that reveals a problem of perspective. If we look at the big picture, what we experience now is nothing like what Christians around the world suffer and nothing like what Christians throughout the ages have endured. The comfort and societal approval we Christians have enjoyed in this country for generations are not the norm. More important, the woe-is-us mentality is sinfully self-centered. It leads us to complain, to lash out, to circle the wagons to try to keep the world at bay, to give up, and to look to flawed human leaders and systems to recover what we think we've lost.

When did God ever tell us to play the victim? Self-pity is the opposite of what we see in Jesus. His pity is not for himself but for the women—and their children and husbands and all their countrymen who would suffer so. Of course, that's not the full extent of his pity. Follow his stumbling footsteps to the cross and watch him be lifted up like a criminal. What are his first words? *"Father, forgive them."* Forgive whom? His disciples? Those poor women? No, the soldiers driving nails through his hands and feet!

Jesus' words reveal a heart that is focused not on self but on others. He was thinking about the families of Israel. He was thinking about the soldiers who had no idea they were crucifying the Son of God. He was thinking about you and me. If Jesus had pitied himself, he easily could have escaped this fate. But he was pitying us wretched sinners who were facing an eternal destruction far worse than anything the Romans could mete out. We deserved to face God's wrath on the Last Day with no mountain in sight to cover us. But Jesus had sympathy for us.

Relish that for a moment. Jesus' heart went out to you. But he didn't just weep for you. He took God's punishment for you. He died for you. He shed his blood to cover you, to hide you from the destruction to come. Through pain and fatigue and insult, you were on his mind.

To say that Jesus didn't want sympathy for himself isn't to say that he didn't deserve sympathy, that his suffering wasn't so bad. That should be obvious. There's a reason those women were moved to tears at the simple sight of him. That a man in his prime couldn't carry a beam of wood tells you what he had already endured—and his torment was only just beginning.

And to say that Jesus doesn't want us to look for sympathy isn't to say that he doesn't have pity on us. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus knows our pain. He's felt it. He can sympathize with us in our weakness. His heart still goes out to us when we suffer, including and especially when we suffer for his name.

But he doesn't want us to wallow in self-pity. He wants us to look past ourselves and look to him, let him help us carry our crosses as we follow him, and find strength in his Word and sacraments. He wants us to look past ourselves and have pity on those around us.

We have brothers and sisters in the faith who are struggling with pain and temptation. We have fellow followers of Jesus who are feeling the attacks of the anti-Christian forces of this world, many of them feeling very much alone. Our Savior would have us pray for them, reach out to them, and remind them of his promises.

Jesus also would have us direct our sympathy even toward our enemies. There is a destruction coming that this world cannot fathom, infinitely worse than the atrocities that took place in Jerusalem. And the people of this world, even the ones who make our lives harder as Christians, don't know it's coming! Many of those who put God on trial are like the soldiers crucifying Jesus: They have no idea what they're doing. They think they're fighting against outdated values or old-fashioned fairy tales—fighting for the rights of humans to live free. They don't realize they're fighting against the Son of God, and they have no idea how badly that fight will end for them.

What if we thought of these people not as enemies or obstacles but as fellow sinners who have been so duped by Satan's lies that they are doing his bidding without realizing it? We can have pity on them, warn them, pray for them, and tell them about God's forgiveness, just like Jesus did. We can point them to the Savior whose compassion knows no limit.

In other words, let's save the sympathy for others. "Poor Christians!" Is that what we should say? What would Jesus say? We know the answer because he told us in a sermon on a different mountain three years earlier: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:10). Blessed we are—happy—to suffer with Jesus. When the world treats us like it treated him, we're reminded that the Father sees us like he sees his Son: righteous and royal. Pity? Why? We have the kingdom! Amen.