

Luke 23:26-47

Jesus is Innocent

Not just once, but over and over again in the trial against Jesus, Pilate spoke words that indicated Jesus was innocent. Whatever the chief priests, the leaders, the people were saying, Pilate could not find any reason to go through with the demands of those present. In one fell swoop, we have gone from crowds shouting 'Hosanna!' to 'Crucify him!'

Why? What had happened in that week from Sunday through Friday? Well, the systems of power had their way, just as those systems have their way today. We don't need to look far at all to see how systems of power have made Putin think he has every right to pillage the Ukraine, and this is just the latest in stories of refugees across the globe trying to find safety, of people living in unjust societies, and the vulnerable being the victims in the story of power and prosperity for those who have the privilege to call the shots, figuratively and literally. Those stories hit as close to home as the people on our streets, with everything in between, the spouse or child who is battered and bruised, the manager who creates an environment of distrust and favoritism, or the hierarchies where you deal with the personalities that want to control.

Jesus died, not to pay a ransom for us and make the cross simply a victory over evil. Jesus did not die because we have sinned and so we deserve to die and go to hell, and in some twisted way Jesus death allows God to forgive us so that we can get to heaven. This is not about debts and payments. And Jesus did not die to show us how much we ought to love one another. That somehow the cross, where Jesus gives his life for us, is the ultimate expression of God's love that should inspire us to love others as God has loved us. This is not fully what the cross is about. Each of these thoughts about the cross has merit. There can be a case made for each in scripture, but no one of these ideas changes us and what happened on the cross should change us. This isn't just thinking about the cross, which all of the presented ideas do, but rather we are called to *experience* the cross.

Let's see if we can unpack this a little further, knowing that we are not likely to come to some ultimate understanding, but maybe go far enough to start to question and ponder the story of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday through Good Friday to Easter Sunday in new ways, using a different lens that opens us to a life changing experience of the cross.

Jesus was innocent. We know that. Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." (v4). And after Jesus has been to Herod and sent back to Pilate, again he says to the chief priests, the leaders and the

people, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death." (vv13-15)

And a third time as the crowd shouts for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate says, "I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." (v22)

But those in power and a riled-up crowd took over and to appease the people Pilate gave in, sentencing Jesus to death on a cross. The most horrible death imaginable at the time. It was so horrible that no Roman citizen could be put to death in this way. But Jesus was not a Roman. Jesus was a Jew and the leaders in that religious element knew that only Pilate would be able to call for the kind of death they were looking for. They wanted Jesus gone, done, out of their hair and made an example of.

But the thing about God is that God takes the most unimaginable situations and can bring live out of horror. It does not mean that people are spared horror, even Jesus wasn't spared from death, but in Jesus' death there was a promise, the promise of life that comes out of death. Something we don't get to understand without Easter.

The cross makes us experience Jesus' death and resurrection and it brings meaning and purpose to our own lived experiences of death and dying into moments of fruitful living. Think of the many ways we suffer and struggle. We fail ourselves, our loved ones. If you think that you are not one who ever fails, then you may need to truly examine your way of being in the world. None of us escapes the hardships that life presents, the losses, the broken relationships, the difficulties. What God does through the cross, what was done to Christ was to offer life. That life comes through forgiveness, grace, and love.

Think of Jesus' life. He went about healing, teaching, and feeding people and everyone loves that part, but when Jesus offers forgiveness people get upset. They ask where does Jesus get off thinking that he has that kind of power. People don't want forgiveness, because forgiveness means they have done something wrong. We want to control our narrative, we want to be in charge of how we deal with all that happens to us and because of us, and it takes a lot to admit when one has committed an offense.

Jesus says, you are loved and you are forgiven, and you get to live your life in the power and light of the cross. Something happened on that day when Jesus died on the cross. It was something profound, something that seizes us, redeems us, touches us. It cannot be explained by some theory or idea, not that these are not helpful in our conversations, but ideas are not life giving, Jesus' death is what brings life. At 6:00 pm on the Friday evening everything changed. The light of life went from Jesus, but it was only the beginning of a new life and light that was to emerge.

In the coming days I invite you to think about the cross. What made the difference that Jesus hung there and then lay in a cold tomb? Just look at a cross and ponder the fact that Jesus did that for you, for me, because though his living was an example of how to be in the world, his death and resurrection said much more about the power of God to change us, to change how we live, right now, today. It is God's power that makes all the difference. It is greater than that of the most powerful leader, country, or system in the world. It is the power of life for every human being. Each one made in love, created by love, and held by love.

Come to the cross, hear the words of the criminal who hung there with him, "This man has done nothing wrong." Jesus is innocent, but in love, meeting us where we are in our human flesh and frailness, takes on the cross, making it a symbol of life, and more importantly changing our lives with its power to bring life out of death. This is Jesus. This is the cross. This is love. This is God come to us. Amen.