Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Sympathetic People at the Cross
Scripture: Luke 23
Code: 80-102

I would like you to open your Bible again, if you will, to Luke 23, as we prepare our hearts for sharing in the Lords Table. As I was reading this chapter over, it struck me that Luke gives us some very interesting insights into some of the people around the cross.

I suppose most of the time when we look at the Cross of Jesus Christ we are prone to concentrate on those who hated Him. We look, so often, at the High Priest and the father of the High Priest, Caiaphas and Annas. Or we look at the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Chief Priests, the scribes, the rulers; "those who accused Him vehemently," as Luke puts it, those who sought His death. Or we look, perhaps, at the soldiers who, with such indifference, mocked Him and plucked His beard and spit on Him and hit Him with their fists. We hear also, the rabble crowd that kept screaming, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" as they pressed their way into the judgment hall to get their will.

But tonight I want, not to look at those that were hostile to Christ, but I want us to look at those that were sympathetic to Him. Interestingly enough in this Chapter, which I read to you earlier, Luke, seems to want to focus on them. There were a number of people who demonstrated great sympathy to Christ. I suppose it would be fair to say that by no means was the whole population of Jerusalem hostile. Most of them were probably little more than curious. Some of them were sorrowful.

It wouldn't take anywhere near the population of Jerusalem or even a small fragment of it to crowd it's way into the judgment hall and scream unmercifully, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" until, finally Pilate had to do that. We certainly don't want to conclude that everybody would agree with the verdict of that crowd.

And as we look through this Chapter, it's almost as if Luke wants to give us a vision of those who demonstrated sympathy and understanding; understanding that Jesus, frankly, was innocent of any crime. The first such personality is Pilate. In verse 13, we read, "And Pilate summoned the Chief Priest and the rulers and the people and said to them, 'You brought this man to me as One who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him.'"

Pilate, believe me, was a very reluctant judge. Luke lets us know that Pilate's sympathies were with Jesus. In fact, Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and he did everything, seemingly, to make that point. Back in verse 4, he said to the Chief Priests and the multitudes, "I find no guilt in this man," again, in

verse 14, "I find no guilt in Him," in verse 15, "Nothing deserving death has been done by Him," verse 22, "I have found in Him no guilt."

Four times does he affirm that Jesus did nothing deserving of death, and frankly, he tried very hard to get out of having to make the sentence. He tried to get the Jews to deal with it themselves, as noted in John 18:31. He later sent Jesus to Herod, as indicated here in this Chapter and verse 7, hoping that Herod would render the verdict. He tried to get the Jews to accept Jesus as the prisoner to be released at the Passover season. And here again he, in verse 16, he even offered to beat Jesus to pacify the blood thirsty crowd and then to release Him. But, no matter what he tried, it didn't succeed and in the end, he couldn't avoid the fateful occasion; but he tried.

He wasn't alone, Herod agreed with him, as verse 15 indicates, he says, "I have found no guilt in this man, no, nor has Herod. For he sent Him back to us and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him." In verse 16, he says, "I will, therefore, punish Him and release Him." And somebody says, "Well, why are you going to punish Him if He hasn't done anything?" In Roman law, a beating was sometimes given with a magisterial warning, so, the accused would be more careful in the future.

Pilate was trying to appease the Jews by such a warning mode of punishment but they wanted Jesus dead and so, in verse 18, they cried out all together saying, "Away with this man and release for us Barabbas." He was one who had been thrown into prison for a certain insurrection made in the city and for murder. He was a true insurrectionist and rebel and a murderer. "And Pilate," and here's the key, "wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again but they kept on calling out saying, 'Crucify! Crucify Him!' He said to them the third time, 'Why? What evil has the Man done?'" He again notes that he found no guilt in Him, again says, "I will simply chasten Him as a warning and let Him go."

But they were insistent with loud voices asking that, "He be crucified" and their voices began to prevail. And Pilate pronounced sentence; that their demands should be granted and he released the man they were asking for, who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will.

It was never Pilate who called for Jesus death. It was never Pilate who wanted Jesus death, on one occasion he even went and symbolically washed his hands of the whole affair. His wife even warned him, "not to have anything to do with this just man" but the crowd was persistent. Frankly, Pilate was sympathetic. Pilate understood completely, the innocence of Jesus.

There's a second man that Luke wants us to meet, who was also sympathetic. We find him in verse 26, "And when they led Him away, they laid hold of one Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus." It was customary for the condemned criminal to parade through the city streets carrying, either the whole cross or the cross beam to his own execution. Jesus, no doubt, started out bearing His cross but having been weakened by the

scourging, was unable to sustain it and faltered in the effort. And so, Simon was selected, perhaps willingly, to step forward and carry the cross of Jesus Christ.

There's an interesting note about this man recorded in Mark's Gospel, Chapter 15, verse 21, just listen as I read, "And they pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene," then it notes, "(the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His Cross."

Now, why does Mark tell us that this man is the father of Alexander and Rufus? Is that somehow significant? Well, it is because in the ministry of the Apostle Paul, such a man as Rufus is noted in Romans 16:13 as "A choice man in the Lord," And his mother is also mentioned. It is reasonable to assume that Simon of Cyrene brought into the world two sons, who were raised to love the very Christ whose cross he carried.

Here was a man who, if not sympathetic at first, became sympathetic and I can't understand any reason for noting that he was the father of those two unless those were the two Christians known to the people who read Mark's Gospel. And thus, we find that, while Pilate knowing the innocence of Jesus sustained his unbelief; Simon, a bystander, was brought to faith.

There is a third group of people who were sympathetic and Luke wants us to note them, in verse 27, "There were following Him, a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him." There was a large crowd following behind the cross and behind Jesus, made up mostly of women apparently, "They were mourning and lamenting Him."

I think it's important to note here that not everybody was clamoring for the death of Christ. Here is a large crowd of people, noted by the word "multitude", mostly women, they are wailing and lamenting. This is not a silent cry, these are not silent tears; this is a noisy demonstration. This is a demonstration of verbalized outwardly expressed grief and anguish. This would catch everyone's attention as this large group of people, mostly women, came down, as it were, the same path, parading themselves behind Christ, weeping and wailing out loud.

Apparently, they would have been known to the people in Jerusalem because in verse 28, "Jesus turning to them said," He obviously heard their wailing, He said, "Daughters of Jerusalem" they, therefore, were not from Galilee, they were not a part of His entourage of friends who had come down from Galilee, they were people from Jerusalem, city dwellers and He turns to them and says, "Stop weeping for Me but weep for yourselves and for your children."

You know, what He's saying to them is simply this, "On the one hand I appreciate your sympathy," and the indication here is that they were just a sensitive group of people. They may have been a group of people who, perhaps, commonly protested executions. They were a group of people who didn't really believe in the anguishing kind of punishment that was being exacted upon this man.

They may also have believed that He, in fact, was an innocent man.

And while Jesus certainly appreciates their sympathy, He is much more concerned with their repentance and He says to them, "Stop weeping for Me but weep for yourselves and for your children, for behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" And I get the feeling here, that you've got a group of people who, basically, are protesting Roman execution. They would be not unlike the people who are now holding vigils around the State of California, protesting the execution of a criminal. They don't believe in this, particularly with an innocent man.

It may have been that some of them had been touched by the power of Christ when they had seen His miracles. They are not believers, however, and that is why Jesus says to them, "You need to stop weeping for me and start weeping for yourselves. If you think it is horrible, what the Romans are doing to Me, you wait till you see what they do to you." And to what does He refer? The destruction of Jerusalem. "You better weep for what is gonna fall on you and you better repent because when that day comes, you will perish."

And then He sums it up with a proverbial statement in verse 31, "For if they," "they" most likely referring to the Romans, "do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?" In other words, "If the Romans do not hesitate the One in whom there is life, what do you think they're going to do when it comes to the nation in which there is only death? If they don't blink in killing the living Christ, do you think they're gonna blink in wiping out the dead nation?" Spiritually dead. "Weep for yourselves."

And here is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, "And the weeping is necessary, not because of physical death but because the destruction that will come on that day," when over a million Jews died, "will send them into an eternal Hell."

Not everybody was clamoring for Jesus death. Pilate wasn't, Simon wasn't, and even came to faith, no doubt; and a large crowd of people weren't.

Fourthly, in verse 32, we meet another one, "Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals; one on the right and the other on the left." Matthew tells us what their crime was; he says, "They were thieves."

Moving down to verse 39, one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are you not the Christ?" that's sarcasm, "Save yourself and us!" It is bitter sarcasm. He calls on Jesus to save, mocking Him, since he doesn't believe He could do it. "But the other," verse

40 "answered and rebuking the first, said, 'Do you not even fear God since you're under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed, justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.'"

Isn't that interesting? I'll tell you what, criminals know who the criminals are and the word running through the prisons was that this man had done nothing wrong. It was common knowledge. It shows how widespread the reality of Jesus innocence really was. Verse 42, he's saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom." And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Jesus saved him and Jesus promised him heaven.

So, Pilate, the man called Simon, the crowd made up mostly of women (lamenting and weeping), and the thief, were all sympathetic to Christ. And they all understood that He was an innocent man and did not deserve this.

We meet another, down in verse 44, "And it was now about the sixth hour," that would be noon, "and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour." That, by the way, is a supernatural miracle, since you can't have an eclipse at Passover; Passover was always determined by the full moon. So, you have supernatural darkness and Jesus, crying out with a loud voice said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit! And having said this, He breathed His last. Now, the when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, 'Certainly, this man was innocent.'" And he said even more than that, Matthew tells us and Mark tells us that he also said, "This man was the Son of God." He was sympathetic and he was in command of the soldiers who executed Christ, most likely.

No, not everybody was sympathetic to the execution of Jesus. Obviously, the centurion came to faith in Christ, Simon came to faith in Christ, one of the thieves came to faith in Christ; this is a great evangelistic effort.

We meet another group of people in verse 48, after Jesus had breathed His last and the centurion had articulated his faith, it says in verse 48, "And all the multitudes who came together for this spectacle," let's stop right there for a moment. This is just the watching crowd. They've really got no interest in the whole deal, other than to watch it. They aren't a part of the rabble screaming for his death, they aren't a part of the High Priests operation, they're not even involved with the Pharisees or the Sadducees, they're certainly not Roman soldiers who are, somehow, indifferent to the whole situation; they're just a whole mass of people who came out that day, climbed the hill because this was a spectacle they didn't want to miss. "All the multitudes who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return," they left, "beating their breasts."

This is the multitudes from the city. They had no special interest in Jesus, except that they must have been convinced He was a good man or they wouldn't have gone away so passionately grieved. There must have been thousands upon thousands of them, coming down the hill pounding on their

breasts. Instead of being entertained, as they thought they might be, they were saddened and they were grieved and they felt some guilt over this.

If you remember the publican who beat on his breast, while he was beating he was saying, "Lord, be merciful to me,"...What?..."a sinner." They must have felt some culpability in this whole operation. Perhaps, that guilt that day prepared them for Pentecost, when three thousand of them were converted.

There's another group of people, that Luke wants us to note, were not sympathetic to the death of Christ, verse 49, "And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee, were standing at a distance, seeing these things." These were His friends, they were standing in the background, in pain, in anguish, fear, horror, grief. They knew He was innocent. They understood that this whole thing was a monstrous crime.

And there's yet another man who had sympathy, verse 50 identifies him, "Behold, a man name Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea," we don't know, by the way, where that was, a city of the Jews, "who was waiting for the Kingdom of God." Here is a true believing Jew, a God fearing Jew and no doubt a follower of Jesus, a believer. This man did a bold thing, "This man," Joseph, "he went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. He took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid Him in a rock where no one had ever lain." Matthew 27:60 says, "It was his own tomb." He did it before sundown on Friday because nothing could be done on the Sabbath.

And after he had done his part, we see the women again, who were mentioned in verse 49. Verse 55 says, "The women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed after, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid and they returned and prepared spices and perfumes and on the Sabbath, they rested according to the commandment." They got it all done before the Sabbath, they couldn't work on the Sabbath and God wanted to be sure He was in there on some part of Friday so it would count in the three days. But the women came and ministered to Him through spices and perfumes, to somehow mitigate the stench of the decaying body; faithful Galilean women.

Isn't is interesting that in the midst of all the rabble, the sarcastic criminal hanging on the cross beside Christ, the mocking soldiers, the vicious false religious leaders, the screaming crowd who wanted Him dead; Luke weaves through this, so many sympathetic people.

Pilate, he was sympathetic, he just never went far enough. Those weeping, wailing women who were following along and Jesus said, "You better weep for yourselves," we don't know the outcome of that story. The multitude that was watching and went away beating on its breast, feeling guilt and remorse over the horror of what they had just seen, that was far from being entertaining; we don't know whether they believed, certainly all of them never did, some of them did. Simon, he believed

and was saved. Apparently, the thief, for sure, he was saved. The centurion gives a clear testimony of his faith.

So, you have some who watched and were somewhat sympathetic and understood His innocence and maybe, never believed. You have some who watched and were sympathetic and understood and did believe. And then you had that group that watched and were sympathetic and understood and had already believed; His friends, Joseph and the women who ministered to Him in the tomb; a relatively large group of people who understood the crime being perpetrated. This is Luke's way of saying, "Not everybody concurred in the execution of Jesus Christ. There was a large group of people, some unbelievers, some believers, some who came to faith; who all affirmed the horror of this crime, that an unjust act was perpetrated on a guiltless man. And that makes me wonder all the more at the Cross for, "He who knew no sin became sin for us."

And we come tonight to this Table as those, who in one sense, were not sympathetic to what was done on the Cross, we understand the innocence of Christ and the heinousness of the crime, and even though we are not sympathetic with and even though we are understanding of the innocence of Jesus Christ, at the same time, we are grateful for it. Are we not? For the One who knew no sin and deserved no death, was made sin and died for us.

Our Father, we thank you for giving us, yet another, and perhaps, a fresh glimpse of the Cross. We concur with Pilate that He, being our Lord, was a just man in whom there was no guilt. We would concur with Simon that this is a man to believe in, a man to teach to your children. We concur with the Centurion that this is an innocent man and this is the Son of God and we praise You as he praised You. We concur with the women who cried and wept. We concur with the multitude who beat its breasts over the horror of such a crime. We concur with Joseph, that such consent to His death should never have been rendered and at least, in death, He deserves the dignity of a proper burial. We concur with the women, that even that blessed body should be treated with care.

And while we understand the horror of the crime and are sympathetic with Christ and understanding of His innocence, yet, we thank You that He died for our sins. And come now to this Table, to celebrate that death with thankful hearts.

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