

Matthew 27:15-26

Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"¹⁸ For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Dear Followers of our Lord and Savior,

"Let his blood be on us and on our children!" How horribly have wicked men through the ages sought to fulfill this curse that the Jewish mob in Pilate's court called down, not only on themselves but on their children's children! Many have been the false Christians and the rabid pagans who felt that any misdeed done against the people of Israel was justified by this one passage from the gospel of Matthew.

How could the Jews of that day have said such a thing? How could they have called down an everlasting bloodguilt upon themselves? The answer is simple: They did not believe that they were. They were convinced that the guilt was not theirs but the Nazarene carpenter's, who had dared to pretend to be their Messiah. When they saw him there, "his appearance . . . so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness" (Isa 52:14), wearing a crown of thorns in Roman mockery of all their hopes from Palm Sunday, they all believed that they had been cheated and taken in by a wicked fraud who deserved everything that the Romans could dish out. They felt Jesus had betrayed them; crucifixion was too good for him!

They didn't want the salvation he came to bring. Have we ever been tempted to stray close to the edges of that unholy crowd? Are we ever tempted to demand something from God that he never promised or to reject that which his Son died to offer? If so, then we must pray:

Theme: Forgive Us When We Despise Your Great Salvation

- 1. We sometimes demand earthly blessings that have not been promised.**
- 2. Father, fix our eyes on the needs of our souls.**

"Let his blood be on us and on our children!" How could they shout such a thing? How could they demand the most horrible and painful death for the man they had hailed as the Son of David and the promised King of Israel? To find the answer, we have to look at the world in the way those people in the mob did. All their lives they had been waiting for the Messiah. From little on up, their heads and their imaginations were filled with him. They wanted him to come so much that they could taste it.

How their hearts would soar at Sabbath worship when one of the prophecies of the Messiah was read! From the first book of Moses to the final book, that of Malachi, the Holy Scriptures set forth the promises

again and again. They told of the place where he would be born. They spoke of the wonders he would bring about. They spoke of triumph after suffering, of an eternal crown that would adorn the head of the heir of great King David.

And the Israelites wanted this—but, perhaps, not in quite the same way the writers of the Old Testament had meant it. They had the desire for salvation, but not the same salvation that was promised in the words of the prophets. The Israelites were under the thumb of an occupying power. They were a conquered people, in a province of the Roman Empire, and that bothered them. It was a blow to their national pride. It was a slap at their religious prestige as the chosen people of God. A Savior from sin and death could wait; the Israelites wanted a Savior from Rome. They wanted a Messiah that would bring vengeance upon the Romans and upon all the enemies of the Jews. The King Messiah would rule all the known world. Jerusalem would become the greatest city in the world, and all people would finally acknowledge the greatness of the people of Israel and of their glorious Messiah-King.

For a while it seemed that Jesus of Nazareth truly fit the mold of the Messiah. Many people echoed the sentiments that the Pharisee Nicodemus had uttered in the dark of night: **“No one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (Jn 3:2). “When the Christ comes,” some asked, “will he do more miraculous signs than this man?” (Jn 7:31).** When he fed the five thousand, what had their reaction been? They had been of a mind to force him to become their king. They had been so enthusiastic for it that Jesus had great difficulty sending them away while he went into the hills to pray. And the day after, they had searched and searched for him, because they thought, just maybe, that the days of the Messiah were at hand.

On the Sunday before the Passover, all the talk was of the raising of a man over in Bethany. Then more and more stories of Jesus’ power came out. And then they saw him coming, just as the prophet had said, **“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zec 9:9)** Then the cloaks came off to be laid before his feet. Then the palms were cut and strewn in his path. Then the shouts began: **“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Mt 21:9).**

But then came Friday. Everyone assembled in the courtyard outside the Roman Praetorium. Then Pilate brought Jesus out and said, **“Here is the man!” (Jn 19:5).** And what did the people see? A man beaten and scourged and bleeding. He hardly had the strength to stand. They had wrapped him in a robe and had put together a crown of thorns to put on his head. The Romans were laughing at him—and, through him, at all of Israel. Here’s your King! Here’s your Messiah! Here is the man who was going to conquer Rome; by Rome he is conquered. And the mob erupted in anger at Jesus. In their eyes he had betrayed his promise to them. He was no conquering king, no Messiah like they had wanted all their lives. He had played up to their hopes and then left them; that’s what he had done! And they were angry with him! Let him die! Let him die by the cruelest torture imaginable! Crucify him!

Not that we would ever join in such shouts. No, our sin of such disloyalty doesn’t end in a murderous rage. But we too can fall into the trap of thinking that, somehow, the Lord is not living up to promises that he never actually made to us. Perhaps we won’t so blatantly reject the salvation of our souls. After all, many of us have been brought up on that thought from little on. We know our Bible stories, our catechisms, and our creeds. We know what Lent is all about, and Good Friday. But, sometimes, all of that seems to be stuck in the past while we have to face life as it is today. Salvation will be of highest importance on the day we die but, for now, perhaps we ought to be able to expect more out of our Savior than just that. There has always been a feeling among many Christians that once you become a Christian, the Lord ought to smooth out your path through life. After all, we are following Jesus, aren’t we? **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18)**—isn’t that what he said? And shouldn’t he then be showing some of that power to give his followers better lives?

And sitting here in church we can see right through this temptation, and we can remember the many passages in the Bible where we are reminded that the Lord God disciplines those he loves and uses even hardships to bring about some good for us. But we aren’t always sitting here in church, are we? And when

things are getting rough for us, the troubles are mounting up, and we pray and we pray and things still don't seem to get better, then we look around and see the unbelievers in this world doing quite comfortably—and something in us begins to wonder. Is God really watching over us?

And we begin to ask why he lets us get so sick. Why does he let us have all these money troubles? Why do we have trouble making good friends? Why are we the ones who are depressed? Why are we the ones who can't seem to get on top in life? Why can't God make things a little easier for us? A poison has attacked our faith. What he came to bring us through his death suddenly doesn't seem as important as the list of things we wish he would do for us in the here and now. And something inside us begins to feel betrayed by him, as if he had promised us a bowl of cherries and then had refused to deliver. And if we listen closely, we can hear the far-off cries of anger and rejection from the mob that we are getting all too close to.

2. Father, fix our eyes on the needs of our souls.

It is at this time that we need to pray, "Father, fix our eyes on the needs of our souls!" That mob couldn't have cared less about forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. They wanted freedom and blessings then and there, and Jesus wasn't about to deliver them. And so they rejected him, utterly and finally. And what good came of it? The Messiah they demanded never showed up. Within 40 years of the day they shouted for Jesus' blood, their city and their temple were destroyed by the legions of Rome. Within another 70 years, the Jews would be exiled from the Holy Land for 18 centuries. God had never promised them a hero to save them from Rome. He had promised and had sent his Son to save them from the devil. But they died in their sins and their unbelief. They traded their souls for a dream that could not come true.

God, keep us from such soul-destroying foolishness! Of course we know that the affairs of our lives are important. God himself has invited us, in the letter of St. Peter, to cast all our cares upon him because he cares for us. He has indeed promised to be with us always, even through the worst that could happen to us, even to the end of the world. But let us not repeat the error of the Jews of Jerusalem. Let us not make up scenarios for ourselves and then blame God if he decides that our lives are to go a different direction. Don't get angry with God because he doesn't keep promises that you have put into his mouth. Learn to do what the Bible says, and wait patiently for the Lord. No, things in life are not going to be a walk through the roses. Hasn't Jesus warned us of this? When the hardships come that he already has warned us about, it would be best for us to respond as Job did before his dissatisfaction set in: **"The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised"** (Job 1:21).

And, most important, let us always fix our eyes on that greatest of blessings, the one promised to us through the ages and throughout the Bible: the salvation of our souls through Jesus Christ. To paraphrase our Lord, what would be the good for us if he gave us everything we wanted in this world but neglected our greatest need: the atoning sacrifice for our sins? Who could enjoy the greatest blessings of this world knowing that, at the end, there would be a terrible price to pay for our sins? The slight and momentary pleasures of this life would be horribly and eternally outweighed by the horrors of the coming judgment.

But for us, the Lord has decreed the opposite. As the apostle says, our light and momentary troubles in this world are not worthy to be compared with the joys that await us, the joys bought for us by the blood of Jesus Christ. What a high price he paid to make you a child of God! On that account, value this gift more highly than any other. Pray for the other blessings, yes. And be thankful when God decrees that you should enjoy them! But whether he decrees that you suffer for a while or he decrees that you enjoy life for a while, fix your eyes on the blessing that will never be taken away from you: your Savior Jesus Christ.

"Let his blood be on us and on our children!" Such a horrible and soul-destroying certainty on their parts, and what a tragedy that the people who had the Savior in front of them rejected the salvation he came to bring! God, keep more people from a similar tragedy! Father, as we come to you in prayer, depending on your mercy and grace, let us never demand blessings you have not promised and let us never feel mistreated when, in your wisdom, you say no to our prayers, reserving for us greater blessings elsewhere. Fix our eyes upon Jesus Christ, our Savior from sin, death, and the devil. May we honor his love and his sacrifice by gratefully claiming him as our Lord and our God. Amen.