

THE MIRACLE JESUS COULDN'T PERFORM Palm Sunday B (3/27/94) Mk 15:31

"In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking (Jesus) among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself.' May the words of my mouth and the meditation of each heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we have heard a powerful story, one that inspires wonder no matter how many times we have heard it. We Lutheran pastors are admonished on Palm Sunday not to preach on some little gem from these many verses, but instead to preach the whole story to help prepare people for the wonderful news of Easter.

Today the theme that draws together for me all that these verses say is: **THE MIRACLE JESUS COULDN'T PERFORM.** It helps me understand how the crowds could yell "Hosanna!" on Sunday to hail Jesus as Messiah, and shout 'Crucify him!' just days later. You know, many times in the gospels it is the enemies of Jesus or the bystanders who speak the greatest truths. Such is the case of the crowds who yell at Jesus, "You who would destroy the Temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" And the religious leaders mock Jesus by saying, "He saved others, he cannot save himself!" Their criticism is an ironic echo of the words of Christ in the garden: "Abba, Father for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." The words of the chief priests and scribes are God's answer to Jesus fervent prayerthis one who saved others, who performed miracles in the presence of many, cannot save himself. This is the one miracle Jesus cannot perform. In order for God's will to be done, it is necessary that one man die for the people...and that man is God's Son, Jesus Christ.

We have often tried to 'improve' on the Passion story by explaining away some of its difficulties. Many times we end up giving our children the impression that Jesus didn't really die....that before we know it he will be risen from the tomb (sort of automatic, like a toaster). The gospel witness is that it was necessary for Christ to die, under these terrible and unjust circumstances, in order that we might be freed from the power of sin and death. And for those who were there, the resurrection was not automatic at all, but something too good to be true, unbelievable. In his dying, Jesus has been abandoned by all; only a roman soldier who watched all of this suffering, who saw him breath his last, could accurately say: 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

This was the miracle Jesus couldn't perform. The one who was hailed as Messiah (as Zechariah promised), emptied himself and took the form of a servant rather than a king (2nd lesson). In that emptiness and submission to God, Christ became the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. His righteousness and death save us from sin and death. He couldn't save himself from death because he was dedicated to save us from death. This is why he came...for such a gruesome hour of death as we observe this week. Mysteriously, it is in his dying that we live, in his blood we become righteous.

Just before Maundy Thursday, a woman did a remarkable thing for Jesus. She broke open a costly alabaster jar of ointment and poured it on Jesus head. She anointed him in preparation for death. And Jesus thanked her for what she had done. It is ironic that in such a short time Jesus himself, the precious Son of God, is broken and poured out for us. There was no way out for Jesus, it was necessary that he die and be the pioneer of our salvation. It will also be necessary that we die...but we know that the anointing of Christ's blood will bring us through death to life. The miracle Jesus couldn't perform, to escape his own death, becomes the miracle which promises us life.

We live in days of irony during Holy Week---just when Jesus seems to have run out of miracles, just when the darkness and hatred have overcome light and love...God does a new thing in Christ. We wait for God to make the next move. James Steward tells a story about a painting of Faust. Faust is the fictional character who gambles with Satan for his soul. The painting depicts a game of chess, with Faust and the Devil facing each other across the board. The game is nearing its end, and Faust has only a few pieces remaining; a king, a knight, and two pawns.

Faust gazes at the board with a look of blank despair. Opposite him Satan leers in anticipation of his imminent victory. Many chess players examined the painting carefully and agreed that Faust's position is hopeless. Checkmate is inevitable.

One day a chess master stood gazing at the painting. At first he was fascinated by the despondency etched on Faust's features. He had known that same despair at the end of an important game. Then, as he noticed the pieces on the board, the chess master became absorbed in the possibilities of the game. Other visitors entered and departed the gallery, but the chess master still studied the board intently, oblivious to anything else around him. Suddenly he shatters the silence of the gallery by shouting, "It's a lie! The king and the knight have another move!" This is the message of the miracle Jesus couldn't perform. God is not checkmated by Good Friday and the crucifixion. God has not come to the end of the line. There is pain to undergo, there is suffering in this death of Jesus. But the King has another move to make. And that move will bring a victory.

May God guide you during these days of Holy Week to walk with Christ and to watch and pray with Christ. May you know that this innocent suffering and death, this miracle Jesus couldn't perform, is for you.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.