

Thanksgiving Eve
November 23, 2016
Luke 23:35-43
Thanksgiving at the Foot of Jesus' Cross
Rev. George Ferch

Fellow-Redeemed in Christ,

Where do you plan to spend Thanksgiving Day? I'll suggest the company is more important than the place, or even the day. That is true of our congregational family, isn't it? We have given thanks to God in a library, an industrial strip, a school cafeteria, and two places in this building not always on Thanksgiving or the night before.

I invite you to spend at least part of our Thanksgiving observance with me in what may seem like an unusual place, the foot of a Roman cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. The company could not be better. We are with fellow believers. We are with Christ our King. Although as we gaze upward, Jesus does not appear regal.

We do not see Jesus risen and reigning in glory as Lord over all things as we did a couple days ago. Tonight we behold him suffering on the cross. Please join me in offering **Thanksgiving at the Foot of Jesus' Cross**. We say, Thank you, Jesus, for not saving yourself but us. Thank you, Jesus, for calling me into your kingdom.

Jesus' enemies spoke words dripping in irony. The rulers sneered, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers mocked, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself...One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him, 'Aren't you the Christ, save yourself and us.'"

Of course, Jesus is the Christ, God's Chosen One. He is the king of the Jews. All believers are Abraham's children. Jesus did in fact save others by not saving himself and coming down from the cross. Thank you, Jesus, for choosing to obey the Father's will for our forgiveness and eternal salvation. Thank you for not saving yourself but us by redeeming all people.

Jesus' cross was Satan's last ditch attack to void God's saving promise. Instead, although Satan bruised Eve's descendant on the cross, Satan suffered exactly what God told him in the Garden of Eden he would suffer, "He will crush your head." We give thanks to God at the foot of Jesus' cross because here, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." [1 Cor 5:19]

It was not Jesus' will to do what was best for him. Jesus shared his Father's eternal love for us sinners, so it was his will to do what was best for us. Jesus only could ransom us and all people from the guilt and punishment of our sins, from the power of sin in our lives, and from the final enemies; death, the grave, and eternal damnation in hell.

Thank you, Jesus, for not saving yourself but for saving us. We have a great need, an eternal need for you and for your atonement. We acknowledge the complete satisfaction your work made for our forgiveness and new life.

As part of our continued giving thanks, we are determined to take the good news about you, our Suffering King on the cross, who became our Exalted and Reigning King at the Father's right hand, out into the world. Then, all may know what Jesus has done for them. Then, they too can go and offer thanksgiving at your cross, and look forward to the reigning Jesus' visible return.

There was one soul who experienced this good news and gave thanks not at the foot of Jesus' cross but from the cross next to it. While another man mocked Jesus, this man confessed his sin, "we are getting what we deserved" and called upon Jesus for mercy, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Our suffering King gave this malefactor every reason for thanksgiving. "Today you will be with me in paradise." His physical suffering soon would end, within twenty-four hours. More than that, the man's soul would go immediately into heaven to be with Jesus and his Father. With Spirit wrought faith and thanksgiving, this man now could close his eyes in death without fear.

I'm reminded of a friend who baptized a man in the Arizona State Prison right before the man went to his death in the electric chair. My pastor friend listened to the man confess his sins, and then like Jesus, he assured this malefactor of his Savior-King's mercy. The man went to his death in faith and thanksgiving.

Faith in Jesus is essentially thanksgiving to Jesus for what he accomplished for me on his cross. What greater thankfulness for a gift is there than using it with appreciation? We are giving thanks at the foot of Jesus' cross because we believe he suffered there for us. He suffered for me as he suffered for the criminal on the cross, and the one in that prison, so that I would be his own and live under him in his kingdom. Thank you Jesus for calling me into your kingdom.

More than once I have been with a dying Christian who desired to hear Jesus say to them, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus asked them in many instances to wait patiently a little while longer. We do not know the season, or the day, or the hour of our departures, or the time of the King's return. In the meantime, our exalted King asks us to be patient.

We prepare to welcome our King then in thankfulness just as tonight we give thanks at the foot of his cross watching and waiting while he suffered. We daily confess our sins and acknowledge we deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment. We wait with our lamps of faith brightly burning for the arrival of our approaching Bridegroom.

Can we even begin to fully appreciate how thankful the two criminals we heard about were to hear Jesus' words? Sure we can when we come to appreciate just how completely our sins separated us from God. We can as we look up from the foot of Jesus' cross.

I once read an article that claimed Jesus' cross is not about God's wrath, only about God's love. That is a half truth which is not the whole truth. The cross of our once despised King is about both.

If you doubt God's anger and required punishment for your sins, look up from the foot of Jesus' cross. If you don't think God loved you, look up from the foot of Jesus' cross. **"Hail, O once despised Jesus,! Hail, O Galilean King! You have suffered to release us, hope to give and peace to bring. Hail, O universal Savior, bearer of our sin and shame; By your merits we find favor; life is given through your name."** CW 351

Unless our risen and reigning Savior-King returns suddenly at midnight, we will celebrate our national day of Thanksgiving somewhere around a variety of traditions. Tonight, we join our hearts and voices in thanksgiving at the foot of Jesus' cross. Amen. <SDG>