

February 28, 2016 “The Man In The Middle” Luke 23: 32-34

If you have ever had reason to enter a courthouse during the seasons when trials are being held, there is an immediate reaction. Courts are extremely busy places. During the seasons in which trials are taking place, the judges start early and they work late. There are lawyers all over the place. In Belleville, you can tell when court is in session by one little detail...there is no parking to be found within blocks of the courthouse. Some of you are old enough to remember the name Will Rogers. He once commented with his dry wit... “we don't seem to be able to control the growth of crime. We ought to legalize it...and tax it out of existence.” Crime involves sin. As long as there are people on this earth there will be sin...and therefore there will be crime. And that as they say, is nothing new.

It was a Friday. Jesus had been whipped earlier to within inches of death. Physicians writing on the subject have said that between the beatings at the hands of guards who enjoyed blood sport, the whipping, the exertion of carrying the cross beam to which He would be pinned at the wrists by Roman nails, the crown of thorns, Jesus has by this point of time lost a significant amount of blood by volume. There was no one there qualified to measure it. The wounding from whipping, was not a case of welts, or damage to the skin. The Roman scourge was designed to dig into human flesh and to tear it. There are documented cases in which prisoners died during the scourging Jesus received. There are cases in which bones were exposed. To keep the pain going, the lashes were applied from the shoulders to the backs of the legs. And all of that went before the scene in these 3 brief verses.

'Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with Jesus to be executed. When they came to the place called, the place

of the skull, there they crucified Him, along with the criminals...one on His right, the other on His left. Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.'

Luke has described the scene well. Few words, an economy of style, a hand full of facts. You see even in Judea close to 2000 years ago...the courts were busy. Three executions on this one day. There are some things we need to notice as we read the familiar details. In fact the details are so familiar we stand to miss seeing the trees for the forest. So we review the facts one by one. First of all we are told that on that Friday, three men were taken out to be executed. And dear, Luke makes it clear, that there are some things we should notice here. Some translations say the other two men were thieves. Luke uses a word that the KJV translates malefactors. Here is what the Oxford Dictionary says in defining malefactor: Criminal; evil doer.

One thing is certain: they may have been guilty of robbery. But their execution by crucifixion means they were guilty of more serious crimes. And I want to be plainly understood. There is blood on their hands. It has been proven in a Roman court that they killed and probably killed more than once. Perhaps in the exercise of rebellion, but not necessarily. But they are guilty of capital crimes. Criminals. Malefactors. Evil doers. Remember when the 2<sup>nd</sup> American President Bush used that term...evil doer. He was standing amidst the ashes of the Trade Center Towers in New York. And Jesus is the man in the middle...not like them.

That is part of what Luke's text tells us. Two other men, both criminals, evil doers were also led out with Jesus to be

crucified. The balance of Luke's carefully written and researched document tells us Jesus was a teacher-preacher who healed people. On the Friday when Jesus was crucified, two other men were crucified. The difference is they were criminals. Remember what Pilate had said? "I have found no grounds in Him for the death penalty!" That was Pilate's 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt to reason with the Sanhedrin, and the crowd they led. Jesus innocent. Two evil doers. Three crucified. And Jesus is the man in the middle.

It was a busy Friday at the place of the skull. It is called Calvary in the Latin..the language of the Romans. It is called Golgotha in Hebrew. It translates into English as the place of the skull. A dome of bald rock. A number of Poles planted into holes to be used as the stem of the crosses on which evil doers were crucified regularly. This is one of those execution sites. A church covers it today so we cannot even see the rock itself. There is a hole beneath the altar, and you may indeed kneel at the altar and reach down and touch bare stone. So many died here, history has lost the count. What history does record is that Jesus died on this site between ordinary criminals guilty of violent crimes.

Verse 33 tells us that on that Friday, this site called Calvary is where they nailed Jesus wrists to that cross beam Simon of Cyrene carried the balance of the way for him. They did the same to two criminals, convicted. Hoisted them up into place. There was an angled seat, you could almost sit upon, but only almost, and once in position they fastened His feet to that well used pole with one or two more Roman nails. Jesus is the man in the middle. And it is upon Jesus our attention, that is to say, our faith is rivetted.

I have quoted Andy Stanley earlier in this Lenten series.

Andy Stanley has both said and written: If you are going to try and understand what Jesus meant by what He said, you have to look at what Jesus did. Jesus said, I give you a new commandment. HE said it to His followers. “Love one another as I have loved you.” Here at Calvary, at the foot of the cross, we get to see as in no other place what Jesus meant by what Jesus said. That new commandment is defined by what happens on the cross on a Friday afternoon in the Spring of the year. We are to love one another, we are to love people...in imitation of the crucifixion. It is to be sacrificial in nature. It is to be this forgiving, spending our lives to love. And it is supposed to change the world and the way of the world, as Jesus did on that afternoon when He was the One in the middle.

Luke says Jesus prayed in the midst of the agony the cross produced for Him. Luke tells us he heard the words. He writes to tell Theophilus he has not forgotten those words, never would, never could, because they define the attitude of the keeping of that new commandment. “Father forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.” The words of the man in the middle, at Calvary, on that Friday afternoon. More than half his blood supply has been lost. The wood is stained anew with Jesus blood.

“Father forgive them.” Yes it is a prayer. In doctrinal terms, the Son is talking to the Father. Jesus is talking to His God, who is our God, and He is God and God redeems. It gets complicated to try and describe doesn't it. Here is what I want you to remember as we think about Jesus on the cross between 2 criminals who were guilty of capital offences. Jesus prays Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing. Did you ever ask yourself this question? Who is Jesus praying for? Some answers would include the following...Pontius Pilate. Caiphias the High

Priest. The Sanhedrin. The Teacher of the Law who dared to ask..."But who is my neighbour? And wanted to trap or tempt Jesus in the process of His answering. The list would include the soldier who slapped Him around. Who beat Him. Those who spat upon Him. Those who crowned Him with thorns and laughed. Who robed Him in purple and mocked Him. Those who laughed at His agony as His body began to shut down. Those who drove the nails, who selected the nails, who handed the nails to the man wielding the hammer.

Those who ignored Him...then and since. Those who explained away the miracles of God...water into wine...cleansed lepers...blind who received their sight, the deaf receiving hearing... those who love the organization more than the gathering of repentant sinners...those who are willing to leave the world to its own resources...to let people perish in their sins and sinfulness instead of taking up the cross and carrying it. He was speaking of those who love the commandments more than the commander. The Bible more than God. Those who explain away the Bible and say the gathering, the church is irrelevant. Jesus was praying for Romans, and Jews, and Gentiles...people like us when we are in the world and enjoying the world too much to love as Jesus loved and loves, when that is what He commanded us to do.

We come to the cross. Remember this. As you stand here, sit here,..waiting for what will happen next, if you have heard Jesus pray, remember this: There is nothing you can do to make God love you more than He already does. That is what this cross means, the one that bears the "man in the middle." And there is nothing you can do, or did do, or will do, that will ever make Him love you less than He does. That too is what this cross means. This was set down long

ago...when the spikes went in the wood.

Let us Pray;

Lord Jesus we come to the cross. Here we

confess our sin and our brokenness. Here we ask for the healing of our souls and lives. We need thee. O we need thee. Every hour we need thee. Fill us with the faith and hope and love that springs from the death that takes place on this cross on a place called Calvary. Grant O Lord that what we attempt and what we actually do, might bring glory to your holy name. Amen