

Introductory

On the Last Sunday of the Church Year, the texts from LSB series A and B deal with the end times. In LSB series C the text is the Penitent Thief. This lesson is not found in the TLH one-year series, and is an alternate reading for the Last Sunday in LW series C. Yet this text is very well-known on account of its being read during the Season of Lent.

When congregations and groups of congregations do a Tre Ore service on Good Friday, the theme is often the Seven Last Words, including this reading from Luke. Many pastors do mid-week Lenten series on the same thing, and the Lutherans have been pulling it out of their “proof-text” bag for years to prove that purgatory does not exist.

All four gospels talk about the two thieves, and Luke’s account is by far the most detailed and thorough. This would be a good time to purchase a Gospel Parallels or look one up on the Interweb. Comparing the accounts, filling in the blanks gives us a very thorough account of what transpired on and around those three crosses on that fateful day.

Matthew (27: 38) mentions that “two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left.” He also relates how various people mocked Jesus, and then (44) notes that the “robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him in the same way,” but Matthew does not quote them.

Mark notes the same, that Jesus was reviled, and (15:32) “those who were crucified with Him also reviled Him.” John, who watched the scene play out “from a distance,” seems to think the positioning of Jesus and the two robbers important, saying (19:18) “They crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.”

The Penitent Thief (“the thief on the cross”) has become axiomatic for a person who experiences a death-bed conversion to Christianity. We do not know either of the two men who are crucified with Jesus until we meet them while they are hanging on their respective crosses either side of Jesus. Tradition has named the one, not the other.

We note that Roman, not Jewish, justice is being administered.

Crucifixion, under the Roman Law, was usually reserved for slaves and the worst kind of evildoers. The incidents of crucifixion were that the criminal, after the pronouncement of sentence, carried his cross to the place of execution, a custom mentioned by Plutarch and other writers as well as in the Gospels. Scourging was inflicted upon the persons executed as in the case of other capital punishments among the Romans. Grotius and other writers have called attention to the fact that the scourging of

Christ was not in accordance with the Roman usage, because it was inflicted before the sentence of death was pronounced. The criminal was next stripped of his clothes and nailed or bound to the cross. The latter was the more painful method, as the sufferer was left to die of hunger. Instances are recorded of persons who survived nine days. The Romans usually left the body on the cross after death. *Catholic Cyclopaedia*

The Reformed and Anabaptist want to make hay out of the fact that it is not recorded that the thief was ever baptized, arguing that therefore you don't have to be baptized to go to heaven, and that therefore it would be wrong for Lutherans and others to baptize babies. They prove too much; if you can get to heaven without being baptized, then why bother?

So it is that many of them don't, or they wait, and many are also jettisoning the Sacrament of the Altar. Actually, they would say that you bother because God told us to do this, or that in baptism you are showing that you are accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, which is what People of the Law are going to do.

The Lutheran response to Baptism of the thief not being recorded is to say that of course he was baptized, and it's such a no-brainer that none of the writers mention it, some even speculating that he had at some point received John's Baptism. Ya, either that or the thief was not baptized, which is ok, because he does not *have to* be baptized to go to heaven.

We need look no further than the verse from Mark that the Catechism quotes, "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" to see this. Jesus could easily have added to "does not believe" the words "is not baptized," but He didn't. Unbelief damns, and belief saves.

Such belief comes by Word and Sacrament, and normally Baptism follows conversion, but these are anything but normal circumstances. This is a very unusual thing, beginning with three men on three crosses. It ought also to be noted here that the institution of Trinitarian Baptism will not happen until sometime prior to the Ascension.

It would be good to review the events of Holy Week leading up to the Crucifixion. They are important events in and of themselves, and besides that, talking about them helps to set the context for what is going on here. The immediate context has Jesus on His way to Golgotha, Simon of Cyrene carrying His cross, and we pick it up there...

Textual Notes

27. As He heads for execution, "Ἠκολούθει δὲ αὐτῷ πολὺ πλῆθος τοῦ λαοῦ - there was following Him a great multitude of the people." For those of you who are keeping score,

this would be the eighth station of the cross. The noun λαός is the word used to refer to Israel/Judah. They are His own, and He may have been encouraged by their presence.

Or maybe not. What were they doing there? They were doing what Americans were doing when they went into town for the hanging. It's a concept largely lost on modern Americans, who are more likely to turn their faces from an execution, not wanting to watch. There was a crucifixion at hand, an occasion to gather together as community.

Then, distinct from them, were “γυναικῶν αἱ ἐκόπτοντο καὶ ἐθρήνουν αὐτόν – women, mourning and lamenting for Him.” The first verb means to cut off or to strike and may refer to the self – flagellation often associated with a funeral. The second verb refers to an audible crying out, also often associated with a funeral.

On one level, these women mourned that any young man should be executed, and this one was an innocent man to boot. These women seem to have been followers of Jesus, and they liked Him, and they were sad for Him. They were sad because He had already physically suffered greatly, and He was about to suffer even more greatly; crucifixion.

But there's more to it than just that. Jesus never married, and He never had any children, and that's the deeper meaning behind these weeping women. Catholics will talk about “Father What-a-Waste,” a young, good-looking priest who would make somebody a good husband, but alas...Jesus would have made good husband material as well, but alas...

More to the point, it was about a male descendant to carry on your family line. This is not as important in our time and place as it has been for most of human history, and in that place and time there was land involved. Sort of like there is often land involved in places like Iowa. Jesus was the first-born, but He will have no son of his own; it's sad.

Our inclination here might be to talk about the spiritual children of Jesus, but the Bible never talks like that. In his first epistle, John (2:1) calls his people “my little children.” Paul calls Galatians (4:19) “my children.” Some translations have John (13:33) quoting Jesus speaking about “My children,” but the pronoun is absent in the original.

Pastors may think of their people as their children, and people may think of their pastor as a father – some even use those words, but when it comes to the Trinity, God the Father is our father, and as Jesus said, anybody who believes in Him is his mother, sister, and brother. Later, He refers to the Apostles specifically as his brothers, but not His children.

28. There are a lot of people there, but it is to these mourning women that Jesus turns His attention, and they – not the crowds – become the focus of His attention. They are not numbered, and they are not named, and they almost surely would have included the same women who were later present at the foot of the cross, and probably then some.

He's having a bad day, and He's unable to carry His own cross, but even in His anguish, Jesus makes the effort “στραφεῖς δὲ πρὸς αὐτάς – turning towards them.” He has a lot on

His plate but physically turned and faced them, and speaks to them, saying “Θυγατέρες Ἱερουσαλήμ, μὴ κλαίετε ἐπ’ ἐμέ· – daughters of Jerusalem, stop crying for me.”

The daughters of Jerusalem – they seem to be the same group as the daughters of Zion – the faithful, tough, spunky women Israel. The phrase that appears several times in Song of Songs. Keil-Delitzsch says that the “daughters of Jerusalem” are “the ladies of the palace” and that they are “the congregation already believing on the Messiah.”

He continues speaking to these women, saying; “πλὴν ἐφ’ ἑαυτὰς κλαίετε καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν – but weep for yourselves and for your children.” In a few short days, He will be enjoying the bliss of heaven, and they and their children will be left behind, stuck on this fallen planet until they die, and tribulation and persecution are coming.

29. He then gives the reason why they should weep for their children; to paraphrase, “it would have been better for them if they had never been born.” Under normal circumstances, according to OT teaching, and even the Natural Man knows this; children are a blessing. Here, the barren womb is called “Μακάριαι – blessed.”

Life under the Roman occupation was always hard, but it will get worse. In fewer than forty years, the Romans will wreak vengeance on Jerusalem and her inhabitants. You are familiar with the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in 70. In the blood lust that comes only from killing, men, women, and even children were killed in a great slaughter.

It was at that time that Christians fled to Pella and Jews to Masada, where the Romans hunted them down, besieged them, and more bloodshed. Jesus talked about how much harder that flight would be for pregnant and women and nursing babies. It was the children of this generation who would be on the wrong side of those gruesome events.

That was then, this is now, and two millennia after the fact, you could say the same about much of Christian history. Things are especially difficult these days for Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Keep those persecuted Christians before your people. Pray for them, and we ought to think twice before calling ourselves persecuted.

30. Things will get so bad that people will desire the mountains to fall on them, etc. See Josephus and Tacitus et al for more historic background on the coming events. Most of our hearers won’t be able to relate to that kind of despair, but historically such desires are very common; national despair has quite often been, and often been given.

31. He continues in an apocalyptic tone by talking about trees, using what may have been a common proverb or saying whose meaning has been lost, but it isn’t that hard to figure out. The meaning, for those of you unfamiliar with wood and fire, is this; it’s very hard to get green – freshly cut and wet – wood to burn. It’s easier to get dry wood to burn.

In the Bible, young and green trees are good and living and bear fruit, while trees that are dead do not bear fruit and are good only for making fire. Consistent with other times

when He used tree language, this is a reference to the coming calamity that will befall Israel; the events of 70 A.D, and Israel will go up in flames at the hand of Rome.

If what is happening to Him can happen to Him, what hope is there for those who are not Him; who are not God. As far as that goes, His destruction is one man, and He will rise from the dead. Their national destruction involved many people; the nation, and it will be a terminal event; Jerusalem and Judaism will never again be what it was then.

Expositors has Jesus saying; “What is happening to me now is nothing to what is going to happen to this people. The green tree represents innocence, the dry tree guilt, ripe for the fire of judgment.” Vide Ezekiel 20:47; Ezekiel 21:3. In many and various ways, the commentators generally have Jesus being the green wood, and Israel the dry.

I was reading a book about a month and three years ago, and the author was using the terms B.C.E. and C.E. as most people use B.C. and A.D. I had heard and been annoyed by those terms on many occasions, and I looked it up once and found out that the “C” means “common,” as in “Before Common Era” and “Common Era.”

Just what does that mean, common? I also discovered that the terms began to be used mostly by Jewish scholars around the middle of the nineteenth century, but again why the word “common” and what does that mean? What it means is that in Jewish thought, a person or thing is either kosher and clean or “common” and unclean.

The meaning of the term is that the Christian era is seen by people who use those terms as the “common” or “unclean” era. It is seen by them as the time when unclean people and the unclean religion of those unclean people took over the world, which the Christian religion has, while the Jewish religion has mostly fallen into irrelevancy.

A couple of observations; 1. When Christians use those terms – they are widely used on U.S. college campi – do they know what they’re calling themselves? 2. Christians don’t get bent out of shape about silly things. Many of the days of the week, many months, and Easter are pagan names, but so what?

Wednesday is a day in the week, and it’s being named after a pagan god is irrelevant, and we don’t even think about it. Easter has become a Christian observance of the rising of Jesus from the dead, and few of us even know about the pagan origins of the name, or care. I am dissuaded from reading books where authors insist on calling me “unclean.”

32. We are now introduced to “κακοῦργοι δύο – two criminals,” who were also going to be put to death. Stop calling them “malefactors,” a word that is not part of our modern vocabulary. But everybody knows what a criminal is, and the translators get it right, except for several direct descendants of KJV, who are guilty of LBT.

We don't know their exact crime, and I used to say that they had done something serious enough to be given the death penalty, which is true. But capital punishment was meted out a lot more frequently and for a lot more crimes than it is today. The English used to have the "Blood Code," and they executed people for a lot of things,

About ten years ago, The Daily Mail famously counted 222 things that could get a man hanged in Victorian England. In our country, the death penalty was at one time ruled unconstitutional and is now used very sparingly. Many states don't have that sort of punishment on the books, and some states that have it don't use it.

33. The procession comes to a place "καλούμενον Κρανίον – called the Skull," which is generally thought to be a skull-shaped hill outside 1st century Jerusalem. You can google that and see a multitude of images that indeed look something like a skull today. It may well have looked like that two thousand years ago, or maybe not, erosion being what it is.

More plausible is the idea that the place gets its name from the preponderance of human skulls that littered the place. The thinking goes like this; if nobody claimed them, these bodies were left hanging there. Animals came and carried them away piece by piece to consume them, but no animal could carry a skull in its mouth; so, the place of the skull.

34. When Jesus says, "Πάτερ, ἄφεξ αὐτοῖς· οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν – Father forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing," to whom does He refer? It refers to "they" who don't "οἶδασιν – know" what they are doing. That verb is the perfect active indicative of εἶδω. The Roman soldiers know that they are executing people.

What they don't know is the meaning of this particular execution. Vine distinguishes this verb (εἶδω) from "γινώσκω – to know," which "frequently suggests inception or progress in knowledge, while *oida* suggests fullness of knowledge." The perfect indicative "expresses a *focus upon result, the state which follows upon past activity*. (FGG)"

If I were to paraphrase that statement, it would be something like; they don't have a clue what's really going on here. Who? The Roman soldiers, who are just doing their jobs, the two men who were with Jesus on their own crosses, the sheep who are without a shepherd, all of whom really don't understand the import of what is going on here.

The Roman execution squad knows that they are executing these men, but when it comes to their execution of Jesus, they have no understanding of the deeper meaning of His death. However, the religious leaders knew exactly what they were doing, and are not among those who "know not what they do." Jesus is not asking forgiveness for them.

35. Two groups are singled out as those who "ἐξεμυκτήριζον – were mocking" Him; The "λαός – people," His own Israelites are there, as well as the "ἄρχοντες – rulers" the religious leaders of Israel, presumably the same people who are responsible for His being on the cross. The verb occurs twice in the NT, both in Luke's Gospel.

In 16:14, the Pharisees are said to respond like this when Jesus talked to them about their assets and God. It means to turn one's nose up, a physical posture that indicates the utter contempt of a thing that is repulsing one, and here it is Jesus Who is causing these people to do what they do with their noses. The crucifixion is not a pleasant thing.

Oh, wait, the religious leaders, they're talking, "λέγοντες ἄλλους ἔσωσεν, σωσάτω ἑαυτόν – saying 'He saved others; let Him save Himself.'" The verb is a present active participle, they kept it up while the people stood by and observed. By their words we see that these religious leaders think that Jesus taught that He has saved others.

They also think that that He thinks that He is the Christ, and that He thinks Himself to be the One who is "ἐκλεκτός – chosen" of God. In all of these things, they are correct, yet they themselves don't believe any of it. They are, in fact, mocking Him for thinking those things about Himself; How can He save others when He can't even save self?

36. Add the Roman soldiers, who "ἐνέπαιξαν δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ στρατιῶται προσερχόμενοι, ὄξος προσφέροντες αὐτῷ - also mocked Him and, going near offering to Him vinegar." This word for "mocked" is different from the other words for mocked, and it is more common in the NT – twelve occurrences besides this one.

The word is used almost exclusively in the context of the Crucifixion, and once to refer to how the Magi "tricked" Herod. It's root is often used in connection with sport, and here perhaps they were making fun of Him like we used to make fun of the Cubs. Some of the nastiest jeering I even heard were from English football – our soccer.

Some of the translations call it "sour wine" and some call it "vinegar," which is wine that has gone bad, and it was the Boone's Farm of the day, Strawberry Hill, but it has gone bad. The participle indicates that they kept up their attempts to give this drink to Jesus, from which we may conclude that He refused to drink it, like the Psalmist (69:21) said.

37. When Satan attacked Jesus in the wilderness, he made frequent use of the conditional conjunction "if." When Jesus resisted those temptations, Satan left Him, only to return at "a more opportune time." This is it. That opportune time of which Luke spoke earlier is now at hand, and we hear Satan, speaking through the mouths of His pastors.

Once again using that conditional conjunction, Satan says "Εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, σῶσον σεαυτόν – If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." Satan, knowing that if Jesus should do what he is proposing, the result would be that nobody else will be saved, but will be condemned to Hell for eternity.

His appeal to Jesus is not only for instant gratification, but for Him to save Himself from death, which is a very human inclination. But Jesus knows what Satan knows, and His sacrifice of self is no more clearly seen than here. Unlike a lot of people, He has the very real chance to save self, and He give it up to save all people.

38. We all know all about the words printed over His head in three languages, and Luke’s placing those words in the middle of the insults that are not yet done leaves little doubt as to Pilate’s purpose in putting them there. He despised the Jews, they had just forced his hand to make him crucify an innocent man, and how does that taste, my Jewish friends?

39. Now the two men who flank Him join in. Putting together the synoptic accounts, it appears that both criminals were trash talking at first, but the one apparently has a change of heart, and he comes down to us with a title; The Penitent Thief. Luke tells us that “κακούργων ἐβλάσφημι αὐτόν – the criminals blasphemed against Him.”

They are called κακούργους, literally “evil doers,” a general word for a person who has committed a crime, and so probably best translated “criminals.” That the man was blaspheming Jesus means that he was using religious language and vocabulary to hurl curses at Jesus. The man appears to be agitated as well.

The man’s question to Jesus “Οὐχὶ σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός; – aren’t you the Christ” expects an affirmative answer. I don’t know if He believed that about Jesus, but he seems to know what Jesus thinks that about Him. He sounds like one of the criminals in *Prison Break*, hurling the aorist imperative “σῶσον σεαυτὸν καὶ ἡμᾶς – save yourself and us” at Jesus.

So, we have Satan speaking to Jesus first through pastors, then through soldiers, and now from the mouth of two criminals. You could probably play around with the larger meaning of those three mouthpieces, but do not allegorize. Matthew specifies “Chief Priests, Scribes, and Elders,” and (27:40) that the hoi polloi also spoke “if” to Jesus.

40. The Penitent Thief would not be the first man to lose his mojo upon finding himself staring death in the face. He has a change of heart, and any talk of exactly the man’s spiritual state prior to this or what specifically caused his change of heart would be speculation and should be avoided. God made a Christian that day on that hill.

He speaks to the blaspheming criminal, “ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ ἕτερος ἐπιτιμῶν αὐτῷ ἔφη Οὐδὲ φοβῆσθαι σὺ τὸν Θεόν – answering the other, rebuking him and saying, don’t you fear God?” The verb “ἐπιτιμῶν – rebuking” is a present active participle; he kept it up. The question about fearing God expects an affirmative response; yes, who doesn’t believe in God?

The picture here an almost surreal one of the man on one side of Jesus using his last hours and minutes on earth and the last words that he would speak on the earth to let forth a steady stream of curses against the Son of God. Meanwhile, the other man, who has had a change of heart, appeals to basic Theism and tells him to put a lid on it.

41. The Penitent points out that the reason they are both here is because they have been guilty of doing criminal acts. As for Jesus, “οὗτος δὲ οὐδὲν ἁτοπον ἔπραξεν – this man has done nothing wrong.” The new Christian now realizes that Jesus finds Himself on a cross for a different reason; Jesus was there to die for his sins, not for His.

42. And then the new Christian asks Jesus to “μνήσθητί μου ὅταν ἔλθῃς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν σου – remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The word “μνήσθητι – remember” is often used in the OT and the NT when God is about to take action. In Exodus, Moses tells us that God “remembered” His people who were enslaved in Egypt.

The action that is about to be taken is the death and resurrection of Jesus and by those things the establishment of His Kingdom. Inherent in the statement is the man’s belief that Jesus brings the Kingdom; he has faith, and he wants a piece of that Kingdom. From what he was, now to this is the complete and drastic change in a convert to Christianity.

43. Jesus assures the new Christian that indeed it will happen, yet today, saying “σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ Παραδείσῳ - today you will be with me in paradise.” His response to the man is very straightforward. The key words in that response are “today” and “paradise,” and the Lutherans always use this verse to speak against Purgatory.

The perceived problem with “today” is not with the thief, who apparently died that same day, and when he died, he went straight to heaven, totally skipping over Purgatory. The perceived problem is with Jesus being in “paradise” with him that day. The time frame of the next three days is in some ways very clear, but in some ways sketchy.

We know when Jesus died and when He rose. We also know that He descended into hell and that it was a victorious descent, but that’s really all we know. We don’t have information about when that descent took place, so we don’t know *when* it happened, but this text would indicate that it happened within that very day.

Review FC IX to see how the Lutherans cop to knowing certain things about the descent, but while also not knowing a lot about the descent, and about how they think speculation about things we don’t know can be harmful. Having said all of that, there is perhaps a component here of not fully understanding the Person of Christ and the Trinity.

The second person of the Trinity, who is at this time hanging on a cross, is also everywhere, including in heaven. There’s nothing in biblical theology that would prevent this same Jesus from meeting up in heaven with the man later on that same day, which – understood in the strictest sense – is what He seems to be saying to the man here.

“Paradise” is a Middle Eastern word that means “garden” in the Middle Eastern sense. I say that because if you look in my “garden” you will find tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, and other crops. A Middle Eastern “garden” would be a green place with a lot of foliage where one would go on a sort of mini vacation for refuge from the cares of the world.

Their “garden” was much more like the English or Irish gardens than what Americans mean when they think of a “garden.” Those gardens are very pleasant to be in, to stroll in, to sit in, and it may even be a secret garden. There could in the Ancient world have been no greater contrast than that of “paradise” and the agony of crucifixion.

Go ahead and talk about those English and Irish gardens to give people a better idea of what heaven will be like. (I do not know if there will be hermits or not in heaven.) Go ahead and talk about the restoration of creation, only new and different and better, that will be heaven. You can never talk too much about heaven from the pulpit.

Law/Gospel

Impenitent/Penitent – The impenitent person is the one who does not want to change, the one who thinks that all is good and that he will go to heaven when he dies. The penitent person is the one who knows that all is not good and that he will go to hell when he died. He changes from belief in self to belief in Christ, a change wrought by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, the Spirit that “makes willing hearts of the unwilling.” (Augustine)

Death/Life – The thief is facing death; first physical, then spiritual. In an instant he goes to facing life; first physical, then spiritual. Since that is the one thing in the end that will matter, that is a big deal.

Misery/Paradise – Along those same lines, can there be any bigger deal or huger contrast than that between hell and heaven. Piece together a description of hell and we come up with a place that you really can’t stand to think about for very long. Look at heaven at “paradise,” a place far different, a place that you almost can’t stop thinking about. People think all the time about what it would be like to be rich, and they think of it even more since lotteries were made legal. Play on that desire to be rich by telling them that they will be one day, just wait for it.

Sermon Titles

“If”

“If you are the Christ”

“Three Men”

“Today, in Paradise”

“What is Paradise?”

“This is the King of the Jews”

“Women Weeping”

Hymns

“O Worship the King” LSB 804

“Jesus, in Your Dying Woes” LSB 447 Second Word

"All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" LSB 549

“Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise” LSB 680

“At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing” LSB 633

Rev. Steven L. Anderson, Pastor
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa