

Christ's Innocence Covers Our Guilt

Leading questions can be dangerous. Leading questions are those sorts of questions that start out the way you might expect, but then try to get you to do something at the end of it. You are getting ready for church and your wife tells you: "you're not going to wear *that*, are you?" You are talking to someone you just met, and he asks you: "you're a Steelers fan, aren't you?"

Leading questions can be dangerous. But they also teach us a great deal. In the words we look at this evening, we find two criminals being tortured to death and our Savior in the middle. One of the criminals turns to Jesus and asks him: "*Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" The criminal asked Jesus a leading question: "You're the Christ, aren't you? Then save yourself and us!" This question teaches us a great deal, doesn't it? It teaches us that that criminal *didn't* trust that Jesus was the Christ. And he *didn't* trust that Jesus could save him. He spoke the words to hurt Jesus.

That leading question was followed by another leading question. The other criminal told him: "*Don't you fear God,*" he said, "*since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.*"

The criminal told the first criminal this leading question: "You don't fear God, do you?" It was more a statement of fact than a question. On that day when our Savior died, there was no one who stood up for Jesus. There was no one who defended him and spoke kind words to him—no one except this criminal. And that leads us to ask the question: who was this man?

We often talk about the thief on the cross. But that is not what this man was. He was far worse. There were three reasons the Romans crucified people. And stealing was not on the list. They would crucify people who were murderers, rebels, or people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. From everything we can see, this man was either a murderer or a rebel.

This man had a great deal of time to think about his situation. And what he told the other criminal was his conclusion. He told him: "*We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve*". The criminal realized that he was guilty. He was guilty of earthly crime. And, even more important: He was guilty of sin. And we don't have to look too far back into his life to see this. In these words we hear him rebuking the criminal and defending Jesus. Only minutes before this he joined in with the other criminal persecuting and attacking Jesus.

He was guilty. He was guilty of earthly crime. He was guilty of sin. And he knew what the result of that guilt was: pain. He was enduring so much pain there on the cross. And he didn't know what sort of pain awaited him after he died.

His guilt crushed him. And in him we find ourselves. Just as his guilt crushed him, so our guilt crushes us. We are guilty of sin. We have parents who are tempted to conclude that the sports their children are in are more important than hearing God's word on a Sunday morning. We have children complain about having to go to Sunday School. We have people who are tempted to think that they come to church as a favor *to* God, not out of a great need *for* God. We have people who would like to pretend they know what God's word says, but don't want to sit down with their pastor and their fellow Christians and learn God's word. We have people who show up for Ash Wednesday, but all the other Wednesday nights of Lent really aren't that important.

Do I need to go on? Just like this criminal, we are guilty of sin. Our God demands our full attention, our full heart. And we give him far, far less, proving our guilt and shame. And should it surprise us then that, because of our sin there are painful consequences in our lives? We look for comfort and all we find is pain. We want joy and all we have in our hearts is anger, pride, sadness and anxiety.

In the end, our guilt crushes us, just as it crushed this criminal dying on the cross beside Jesus. This man came face to face with his guilt. But what made it even more painful was the man being crucified beside him. If his-own guilt caused him pain, then Jesus' innocence caused him even more pain. When they made fun of this man, he prayed for them. When they cursed this man, Jesus, he asked his Father to forgive them. When he was in agony, He was concerned about his mother having a home and someone to take care of her. This criminal saw that Jesus

was different. He saw that Jesus wasn't just innocent of a crime worthy of death, he was innocent of all crime, all sin.

And it was that innocence that caused this man even more pain. For it made him see his guilt all the more clearly. And Christ's innocence does the same to us. Years ago, they had those bracelets with the letters WWJD on them: "What Would Jesus Do?" And they seemed like a good idea, for a time. But, if you actually thought about what they were asking, they always drove you to guilt and despair. For, whenever I asked the question "what would Jesus do?", the answer was always the same. He wouldn't mess up, like I did. He wouldn't sin and then have to bear the consequences of his sin, like me. And so, Christ's innocence exposed my sin like cockroaches in a dark cupboard.

And that's what the innocence of Jesus does. First it shows us our hideous sin and guilt. Then, it covers it. We see that in these words this evening. The criminal saw how innocent Jesus was. And that innocence moved him. It moved him to speak against the other criminal. It moved him to speak for Jesus. It even moved him to ask Jesus for something he had no right to ask for. He begged Jesus: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

Notice very clearly what this criminal was asking. He was not asking for salvation. He knew that he was guilty of sin. He was asking Jesus to remember him when he went into his kingdom. So, if Jesus has a kingdom, then what is he? He is a king. He was telling Jesus: "I know that you are a king, please remember me when you enter it again." He asks that Jesus remember him. But, notice what he is *not* asking for. He is not asking for Jesus to continue to remember him. He is asking Jesus to remember him just once. It is a desperate plea from a hopeless man.

And now, notice how Jesus answers him. He does not tell the man to make his decision for him. He does not tell him to do something to earn his salvation. Jesus knows, just as the criminal knows, that there is nothing he could do to earn heaven. But, then notice what Jesus does. He promises to this man that he will be with him that very day in paradise. Jesus treated him as if he were innocent, because, in the eyes of his Father, the man was innocent. Jesus had been innocent. And he gave that innocence to this man.

Jesus' innocence covered this man's guilt. And it covers our guilt as well. And just as the guilt of sin has consequences, so also does the innocence that Jesus gives us. Jesus said: *"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."* And that promise is for us as well. If we were to die tonight, we would be with Jesus forever in heaven because his innocence covers our guilt.

And it is that innocence that moves us to give to him our best. It is that innocence that moves us to rejoice when we have the privilege of gathering together around his word, whether it upstairs here in worship, or downstairs in study. His innocence moves us to realize that the only important thing in our lives is Jesus and our connection to him through word and sacrament. It moves us to set aside time not just on Ash Wednesday, but as many Wednesdays and Sundays as we can gather around his word. For here is where we hear about the innocence of Christ. Here is where we receive that innocence through word and sacrament.

And so, my brothers and sisters, Christ's innocence shows us our guilt. Then it covers our guilt. Amen.