

**“To Forgive, Divine” (Luke 23:33-43) Christ the King, November 25, 2007**

In Stockholm, there is an old church that is quite beautiful but, in one respect, quite baffling. On its back wall there is a magnificent crucifix, far bigger than the one on the altar, yet it's placed where no one can see it – at least, no one but the preacher. How come? A tourist might just chalk this up to chance, but actually there is a good reason for this placement, and it goes back centuries to a Sunday when the king attended worship there. Now, the preacher learned ahead of time that the king would be visiting, so he did his best to fill the sermon with royal flattery. In fact, when Sunday rolled around, that's about all his sermon was filled with. Afterward, the king was gracious enough, so the preacher felt sure he had won his favor. And he thought this even more when a large package arrived from the king. The preacher could hardly wait to open it. And you've probably guessed what was inside: that magnificent crucifix. *It seems I did win the king's favor!* the preacher thought. But his pride soon turned to dust as he read the king's instructions: *“Hang this crucifix directly across from the pulpit, so that every preacher will see it clearly and keep focused on what they should be preaching about: Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.”*

There is an obvious lesson here for any preacher, including myself: *keep focused on Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.* But even if I never preached another word, this lesson would still be important for me to remember – just as it's important for all of us to remember: *keep focused on Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.* After all, this is the heart of our faith: Christ and Him crucified. This is the basis of our hope: Christ's atoning sacrifice for our sins. There is no other way of salvation, no greater spiritual truth, no better life to live than that which is rooted and grounded in Christ; Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.

And if there was ever a time when we Christians needed to remind ourselves of this, it is now! Not just because we live in a time when society calls “right” what God calls “wrong.” Not just because we live in a time when guilt has been trivialized into a mere feeling. Not even because we live in a time when God Himself has been re-designed in people's minds to just be a cushy love-puppy instead of the holy and righteous One, the maker and judge of all. No, the problem is what all this has led to. Feeling little need to deal with sin, overcome guilt, or prepare for a day of reckoning, many people focus on something else – namely, what God should do for them. Now, don't get me wrong. God can do a lot. God wants to do a lot. Indeed, God has done a lot. Every single blessing, from the greatest to the least, comes from God. But there's a problem when this becomes the focus of one's religion – which, for many people, it has. Not to put too fine a point on it, their attitude seems to be: *If I'm going to give God my time and devotion, then He owes me special treatment in return. At the very least, I expect to feel happy. Then, too, I expect my kids to turn out well and my marriage to be a success. I expect good health for me and my loved ones. There should be no hardship, no tragedies. And death should come when and*

*where and the way I want. In short, if I'm going to bother with God, I expect Him to pull some strings for me. Otherwise, what's the point?*

Now, you may think I'm exaggerating a little, and maybe I am...a little. People don't necessarily say such things out loud. But you would be amazed how many people are angry with God, even turned off to God, for the very reasons I just mentioned. Or maybe you wouldn't be amazed. The "*God-let-me-down*" attitude is rather common these days – so common that we hardly know what to say.

But previous generations would have known exactly what to say:

- that religion is not about God rearranging the universe to suit us;
- that God owes us nothing, and we owe God everything;
- that this inflated sense of entitlement just proves our sinful nature is alive and well and just as selfish as ever; and
- that what we really need is a reality check...and then to repent...and then to refocus on Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.

For the truth is, whatever blessings we might want, this is the one blessing we really need: Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.

Some may be thinking: *The one blessing we really need? Did I hear that right?* Yes, you did. Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins is the one blessing we really need. Some may not agree. Some may think forgiveness is a nice assurance to have, but by no means the one blessing we really need. Still, I stand by what I said. I mean, think about it! Suppose God did give us perfect lives and perfect kids, perfect marriages and perfect health. Suppose God did exempt us from all tragedy, all pain, and then arranged our death to occur exactly how we wanted. Suppose God gave us everything our little hearts desired – except forgiveness. Where would we be then? Especially after death. Standing before God in eternity. Where would we be then?!

We might well ponder this question as we read today's Gospel. Here was Christ nailed to the cross, with two criminals on either side of Him. He was suffering for our sins, dying to win us forgiveness, doing everything necessary to give us the one blessing we really need. But this was lost on one of the criminals. He shouted: "**Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!**" No doubt he was being sarcastic, but in so far as he expected anything of Christ, he was just like the folks today who want Christ to make their present situation better and don't think any further. Now, Christ ignored this taunt. But ask yourself: what if He had done what the guy wanted? He could have, you know. With a blink of His eye, three sets of nails could have disappeared, three pairs of hands and feet could have been healed, three crosses could have turned to dust, and with the crowd dumbstruck with awe, the criminals could have escaped while Christ went on to become just the kind of Messiah the crowd wanted – one who would free them from the Romans, rule over their land, and use His powers to make their lives trouble-free. Yes, Christ could have done all of that with a blink of an eye!

But what if He had? What good would it have done? With their new-found freedom, these criminals would surely have gone back to their old ways again, which would mean that, before too long, they'd just be caught again, condemned again, and crucified...again. Then what would become of them? Without Christ to save them, they'd just die a little later than they would have anyway. And after that? Standing before God in eternity? Without Christ to save them, they'd have no hope of forgiveness – because Christ would have given up His mission to atone for their sins on the cross. In short, they'd be in big trouble if Christ had heeded the plea to **“save yourself and us.”** Nor would they be the only ones! The same would be true for the crowd who got just the kind of Messiah they wanted. For a while, they might live in the perfect welfare state; for a while they might have full bellies, no illness, and no taxes. But after that? Standing before God in eternity? Without Christ to save them, they'd be no better off than the criminals! Without Christ to save them, they'd have no forgiveness of sins, either. What would have seemed the perfect solution to all their problems would leave them stuck with the ultimate problem: no reprieve from divine judgment, no escape from sin's consequences, no chance of going to heaven. None!

And that would be true for us, too! So thank God Christ stuck to His mission! Thank God He kept focused on the one blessing we really need: the forgiveness of our sins! Remember, it was not just to give us a nice assurance that Christ was **“despised and rejected; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.”** Our salvation depended upon Him doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. It was not just to give us a nice assurance that **“He was stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”** Any chance of us going to heaven required this atonement. That is why **“He was wounded for our transgressions.”** That is why **“He was bruised for our iniquities.”** That is why **“the punishment we deserved came upon Him.”** Christ took our place, took our sins, took our punishment, so that when it's our time to stand before God, we need not fear condemnation. Scripture makes this clear: **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** And equally clear is the reason why we can trust this: **“By His wounds we are saved.”** However many sins we may have committed. No condemnation! **“By His wounds we are saved.”** However often we may have fallen down. No condemnation! **“By His wounds we are saved.”** Every one of our sins has been blotted out by the blood of Christ, and **“whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life.”**

By the way, this is true whether or not we get everything we pray for. It is true whether or not God smoothes our way through life. If we are faithful unto death, at the end of the road awaits the crown of eternal life – unearned, undeserved, yet ours. Likewise eternal joy. Likewise eternal peace. Likewise eternal glory. All of these blessings await us as a gift of grace. And when we receive them, I doubt we'll feel much anger over what we missed here on earth. To the contrary, how grateful we will be for the one blessing we really need! How grateful we will be for Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins!

In this respect, I can't help thinking about the other criminal crucified with Christ, the one who said, **"Remember me when You come into Your kingdom."** Of all the things he might have asked for, to ask for this! How his partner in crime must have sneered at him! How those around him must have laughed – especially after Christ promised him, **"This day you will be with me in Paradise"**! But when this criminal closed his eyes in death, what peace he must have felt, trusting he had nothing to fear! And a split-second later, as he opened his eyes again, what joy he must have felt discovering Christ' promise was true! Instead of the eternal darkness he deserved, he found himself in eternal glory! Instead of trembling before God, he felt enveloped by divine love! All his failings were blotted out. All his flaws were smoothed away. His body was transformed...and his character, too. Not because of anything he had done. Purely because of what Christ had done – Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of his sins!

That's what we can look forward to as well! And doesn't that put so much into perspective? Certainly, we are welcome to ask God for other blessings beyond the one that we need the most. In fact, God encourages us to ask for blessings, to seek blessings, and to keep on knocking at heaven's door! But these other blessings must not be our main focus. Whether or not we get them must not determine our attitude toward God. We need to keep our eye on the goal, our eternal goal!

Never forget that as we go through the ups and downs of life, the temptation will be to overlook what God has given and focus on what we haven't received. That's to be expected. Still more, the temptation will be to focus on what's temporary and ignore what ultimately matters. That's to be expected, too. So let's not get fooled into playing that game. Instead of caving in, we need to resist this temptation all the more, and keep our focus where it belongs.

In fact, that is the call before us this feast of Christ the King! Others may pin their faith on whether they get this or that blessing. Let us nail our faith where it belongs: on the precious cross of Christ! Others may choose to wallow in anger or self-pity. Let us dwell on something infinitely more positive: the saving grace of Christ! His suffering overshadows any suffering we experience. His death overshadows any loss we might endure. And He went through it all for us! He held nothing back but gave all He had for our salvation. Let us hold onto Him and this salvation come what may! Whatever blessings we might want, let us focus above all on the blessing we really need: Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.