

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:42

*"There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them."*

*John 19:18*

Before any of us were born, in the decade of the 1930's and early 1940's there arose in that crucible of conscience that was Nazi Germany an extraordinary group of theologians. Among them was a Swiss Reformed professor and Pastor named Karl Barth. He was described by Pope Pius XII as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. He was the intellectual leader of the German Confessing Church, the Protestant Group that resisted the Third Reich. Barth was removed from his post at Bonn by the Nazis in late 1934 and moved to Basel Switzerland where he continued to teach and write and preach until 1962. He died in 1968 having left behind some of the most poignant, thoughtful and piercing essays, books and sermons ever published. Tonight I would like to share with you the gist of what he had to say to the inmates at the prison in Basel at the Good Friday service in 1957. Before beginning his sermon, Barth invites everyone present to read the story of Good Friday and the suffering and death of Jesus Christ in each of the four gospels. He speculates that this story contains the whole history of the world and God's dealings with mankind and mankind's dealings with God. Barth's focus is on the company of the two men who were crucified next to Jesus. In the gospel of John, the one that we heard tonight, the two men are not identified as thieves or criminals, but like Jesus they found themselves hanging on a tree.

So there they were...these three, all exposed to the same public abuse, the same public humiliation, to the same interminable pain, and to the same slow and irrevocable death throes. The two hanging with Jesus had been arrested somewhere, locked up and sentenced by some judge during the last few days. And now hanging on their crosses next to Jesus, they found themselves in solidarity and fellowship with him. Do you know what this implies? It implies that this was the first Christian fellowship. Barth describes Christian community as manifested wherever there is a group of people close to Jesus who are with him in such a way that they are directly and unambiguously affected by his promise and assurance. To live by this promise is to be a Christian community. The two criminals, one on either side of Jesus, were the first certain Christian community.

We often think of the disciples as the first Christian community, but Barth points out to us that when the stakes were high, they abandoned Jesus. They didn't live by or make their decisions based on the promise and assurance of Jesus. They betrayed him. They took off. They denied him. It may have been the first Christian community, but it was quite a wavering community.

For the two criminals on either side of Jesus it was different. They had no choice. They had probably never heard of Jesus or, if they had, they certainly weren't converts and model citizens. Whether they wanted to or not, they couldn't abandon Jesus. They couldn't go anywhere. They were forced to watch with him for many long hours on the cross. They couldn't deny him. They were publicly exposed as his companions in execution. He and they were bound together by this shared experience and they were not to be separated in all eternity. Great things had to happen before Peter and the rest of the disciples joined this first Christian community. And when they did, they could only get in line behind these two criminals who were the first.

So just exactly how did Jesus end up on the cross? Pretty much the same way his two companions in death ended up there. To quote Barth: "On account of his deeds and words a man had become unbearable for his fellowmen and then sent him from life to death, making him innocuous, extinguishing his life." None of the three of them can cause any more trouble for anyone else. Jesus was troublesome for the Temple hierarchy and he posed the threat of disrupting the Pax Romana...Roman peace...for the Romans. He was trouble for everybody! Jesus would not have been himself and they would not have been themselves had they acted differently and not done this to him. So Jesus had to suffer the same lot as the two criminals beside him had to endure. Jesus was with them and they were with him.

Jesus' sufferings, however, were but the outward and visible sign of an inward event. Through the visible suffering and death of this man, Jesus, an invisible event took place which did not and could not happen through the suffering and death of any other man. Because Jesus and he alone was a man like us, yet at the same time different from us because in him God himself was present and at work. The Roman centurion declared as much when he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

How did this happen? St. Paul said it best when he said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." In this man Jesus, God himself came into the world, which he created and against all odds still loved. He became man, like us, in order to put an end to the world's fight against him and against itself and to replace man's disorder with God's design. In Jesus God made manifest his glory and he did it, amazingly enough, so that we could be salvaged. To accomplish this, he not only bandaged, but healed the wounds of the world; he helped mankind not only in part and temporarily, but radically and for good in the person of Jesus; he delivered

us from evil and took us to his heart as his children. Because he did this, we are all permitted to live and to live eternally.

It happened through this man on the cross that God cancelled out and swept away all our human wickedness, our pride our anxiety, our greeds and our false pretenses whereby we had continually offended God and made life difficult, if not impossible, for ourselves and for others. He did away with it all the dichotomy we know: rich and poor; slave and free; highborn and lowborn; happiness and unhappiness; healthy and sickness and all the rest. In Jesus God took upon himself the full load of evil; he made our wickedness his own; he gave himself in his dear Son to be defamed as a criminal, to be accused, condemned and delivered from life unto death as though he, the Holy God, had done all the evil we human beings did and do. He the innocent took the place of we the guilty. He the mighty took the place of us the weak. He the living One took the place of us the dying.

This, my brothers and sisters, is the invisible event that took place in the suffering and death of the man hanging in the middle cross of Golgatha. This is reconciliation: his damnation our liberation; his defeat our victory; his mortal pain the beginning of our joy; his death the birth of our life. We do well to remember that this is what those who put Jesus to death really accomplished.

And they did not know what they did!

We do not know the names of the two who were crucified on either side of Jesus. We don't know what their crimes were. We don't know if they were guilty or innocent. We don't know if their guilt might have been greater than anything we could imagine. We do know, however, that without their consent and against their wishes they were, in fact, crucified with Jesus. No one before or since has ever witnessed so directly or so closely God's act of reconciliation; God's glory; and the redemption of the world.

Make no mistake: Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and on his left and went to their deaths as Jesus was going to his. Jesus did not die for a good world; he died for the sake of an evil world. He did not die for the pious, but for the godless; not for the just but for the unjust. Jesus died for all the sinners that they might be delivered; that they might have victory over death as well and that they might have life everlasting. He died for the two criminals who died with him. Jesus, like them, was condemned as a lawbreaker, a criminal. All three were under the same verdict.

Think, too, what Jesus had said the night before to his disciples: "This is my body which is broken for you. This is my blood that is shed for you." His disciples could not have known what he meant, but now his body is broken and his blood has been shed. And the two criminals beside Jesus didn't just witness this act. They participated in it. Their bodies were broken and

their blood had been shed. They weren't mere spectators. How directly and closely these two not only saw with their eyes and heard with their ears, but experienced in their own flesh and in their own dying hearts. The King of Life, the one who is overcoming death was the poor suffering servant whose dying gasp was mixed with their own. The one who was to rise again on the third day, went to his own death with them. St. Paul said, "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall live with him." Those two literally died with Christ.

The promise was meant for them. The promise is meant for us. We need only to receive it and possess it. This promise constitutes the Christian community.

What a Good Friday, indeed!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

<sup>1</sup>Barth, Karl. "The Criminals with Him" in Deliverance to the Captives, WIPF & STOCK, Eugene, Oregon.1978. pp 75-84.