

Michael J. Mathey
Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 20, 2022
Text: Luke 23:27 – 43
Title: Over and Over and Over Again

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Here we are on the Last Sunday of the Church Year. Many are out in the woods hunting that elusive buck, Thanksgiving is this week, and the season of Advent looms just around the corner to help us prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth. This is the time of year when the Christian church seems to struggle the most to get our message across that Jesus, the Creator, has entered into His creation as a human baby to save sinners from eternal damnation.

It's really not a big surprise that this should be the case either. Over the next few weeks everyone around us will be striving to capture that warm, nostalgic feeling that they hope will lift their spirits at a pretty dreary time of year. The retail stores, toy companies, and tech producers are shouting at the top of their lungs to get you to notice their latest bargains and their newest items as they try to tempt you to get the newest and best possession for your family or for yourself. They do their best to get you to believe that whatever they are offering is something that you must own. And of course the entertainment industry is in full swing as they invite you to see this year's best and most exciting films or to rewatch an old favorite.

In the middle of all of this yuletide sensory overload, comes the Christian Church straining to be heard above it all with a message like the one that we read in today's Gospel. It seems so out of place, doesn't it? This is the time of year for being thankful, for "warm fuzzy" feelings and for getting into that so-called "Christmas spirit," – whatever that means – and here we are in the church talking about a gruesome execution brought about by false charges as well as the end of the world. On top of the inherent gloom and doom of such events comes the

inevitable realization that we've heard it all before. This just isn't the right time of year to be reading about Christ's crucifixion. Even though it's the Last Sunday of the Church Year, we shouldn't have to be focused on these images. They just don't belong here. Why would the regularly appointed readings for the Church Year end with this Gospel reading?

That was the very question that popped into my mind when I first began looking at the readings for this morning's service. "What were they thinking? How does this fit into the end times? Why do we need to read this lesson again at this time of the year?" My memory was flooded with Good Friday sermons and services from years past. The trial and arrest in the garden and in Pilate's palace; the scourging at the hands of the soldiers; the procession out to Golgotha; and finally, the nails being driven into Christ's hands. All of these images danced across my memory, and my mind said, "These just don't belong at this time of year. This is the season for the cute little baby in the manger or at least nice pictures of that first thanksgiving feast. It's not the time of year for a picture of a horrible and bloody crucifixion that happened outside of Jerusalem." But in spite of my initial protests, the text has remained the same, and I have kept coming back to it over and over again to try and figure out why we are asked to read it on the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

Let's go back to it together, "And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and the hills, 'Cover us!' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'"

There is the first clue of why we are reading this part of the passion account today. As He is being humiliated and led out to His own place of torture and death, Jesus tells those women not to weep for Him but for themselves because a day is coming when they will think that it's better never to have had children. In other words, it will be a day so bad that they can't even begin to imagine it. At this point of His own personal suffering, when He has been beaten to a pulp, Jesus warns everyone about the Day of Judgment that will come. Faced with His own death and separation from the Father, Jesus tells those who are faithfully following Him that the Day of Judgment that is coming will be far worse, even worse than the crucifixion that He is about to experience. Jesus warns everyone about the end of the world, which we are looking forward to in our worship today.

Judgment Day is something that the entire world should fear. It is a day that will bring incredible and horrible sights that we can only begin to imagine using the descriptions in God's Word. But even worse than all of those images of destruction and terror will be the final Judgment of the world. The unfaithful will be separated from the faithful, and each one will be given what they desired most in their life, either an eternity without God for the unfaithful or an eternity with Him for the faithful. It is only then that the unfaithful will realize just how merciful God was to them while they were still in this world. They will realize it because they will suddenly find themselves lost to the eternal tortures and torments of hell.

It is here that the warning of Christ applies to each one of us here today as well. Remember, Jesus is giving His warning to faithful people, and He has been accused, condemned and is being executed by individuals who have convinced themselves that they are acting in accordance with some of the same Laws of God that we believe and confess here today. Jesus

was crucified by people who believed that they were faithful to the Word of God and who were secure in their own sin. They didn't believe that what they were doing was sinful.

It is all too easy for each one of us here today to be secure in our sin in the exact same way that the Jews were. Every one of us has a favorite sin. That's a certain violation of God's Law that you just can't seem to stop doing no matter how hard you try. Whatever it is that you personally struggle with, you become secure in it when you sit here and say that it really doesn't matter in the end because God forgives it anyway, so you stop trying to resist the temptation. You know that you're secure in your sin when you can hear or read God's Law and see that it applies to anyone else around you, but you don't see yourself condemned by it as well. And you are definitely secure in your own sin when everyone at church is a hypocrite and deserves the blame for whatever problems exist there; everyone is to blame except for you, of course.

The simple fact is that every one of us is a sinner who deserves to be judged when Christ comes again. As Paul states it in Romans 3:10 – 11 "...as it is written, 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God...'” And John makes the point just as clearly as he writes the words that we use to begin the confession in the Divine Service, “If we say that we have no sin, then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” We will be judged. We deserve it, and there is no question that it will happen.

But the verdict will be different than what any one of us deserves. You deserve to be condemned. You deserve to suffer and to die eternally for the sins that you have committed, but that isn't what will happen to those who remain faithful to Christ Jesus. Instead, His suffering and death will be credited to you. He will be the final judge, and He will pass the verdict of not guilty. Notice that I didn't say the verdict would be, “Innocent,” because you're not, but by

God's Grace you will not be held accountable for your sins because Jesus has already lived the perfect life and suffered the death that was required by the Law. And the Father does accept His perfection in your place.

Today's reading shows us this part of Judgment Day as well. The second thief on the cross showed that he was a man of faith, and that he was depending on Christ's sacrifice for his own salvation. Jesus declared that the thief's faith would not be in vain when He spoke these words to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." There is no question or room for doubt in those words of our Lord. That man's salvation was assured by the Words of Christ just as your salvation is. Your faith is not in vain. He has and will continue to forgive your sins, even those that you have been secure in and not repented of, and He has and will save you from the final punishment on Judgment Day. His death guarantees it.

So, why is this reading chosen for the Last Sunday of the Church Year? It declares to the women of Jerusalem the coming Judgment that all of us will have to face. It warns sinners, even those of us who have faith in Christ, not to be secure in your sins because that will lead you to betray the very Jesus who you confess as Lord and Savior. And finally, it assures you that salvation is guaranteed by Christ Himself for everyone who still repents in this world, and when He does come again, on that very day, you will be with Him in Paradise. Amen. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.