Guest Preacher - Rev. Dr. Malcolm Maclean

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Preacher: Rev. Malcolm Maclean

[0:00] We can turn to the Gospel of Luke and chapter 23 and read a couple of verses from verse 32 to 34.

! Two others who were criminals were led away to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.
And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do, and they cast lots to divide his garments. It was customary for a group of five legionaries to be involved in a crucifixion.
There would be a centurion and four soldiers.
And it was part of their role. So on this particular day, they would not be surprised that they were involved in this task.
[1:35] They had probably done it numerous times and they would no doubt were quite efficient at their task. And at one level, they were obeying the government.

And then Pilate had sentenced these three persons to be crucified. And so these soldiers just went ahead and did it.
It was an expression of obedience to the civil powers. At the same time, they would be totally indifferent.
At least two of them, two of the people to be crucified had been involved in a rebellion.
And a rebellion against what these soldiers stood for. So the soldiers may even have engaged in an act of revenge.
[2:46] But the other one that they were crucifying, well, who was he? They probably thought he was deluded.

Especially as they, as Matthew tells us, they put the board above his head, which said he was the king of the Jews. Pilate had demanded that that particular statement be put there.
Not because he thought Jesus was the king of the Jews. I mean, Pilate didn't think that at all. But it was an act of contempt for the Jews.
Pilate said, this is your king. And this is what we can do to him. So they were involved.
No doubt they had different responses, as I've tried to indicate. But they didn't realize, did they?
That what they were doing was part of the most important event in human history.
[4:01] That, they didn't realize this. But it wasn't really Pilate who had selected that would be there. It was God.

God had arranged that group of five men would be at Calvary that day. And you have to remember that.
Every person that was at the cross, they went there, apart from the two that were going to be crucified with Jesus, every person that was at the cross, they went there freely.
There were some there sympathetic to Jesus. They were devastated, of course, his followers. And there were also some of the local inhabitants, and they were just distressed.
The women of Jerusalem just weeping to see another of their citizens being treated in this way. But they were there, these five men, because God had planned it.
[5:14] That's the real reason behind all the events. I want us to think about four things today. I've given them the title of Profession, Prediction, Prayer, and Process.

Profession, Prediction, Prayer, and Process. Why were these men in Jerusalem?
I've just mentioned that God arranged it. But on lower levels, why were these five men in Jerusalem? And the answer is, it was their profession.
They were soldiers. It's interesting what you can find out from Google. A Roman soldier served for 25 years.

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And he did that because he would get an income, and at the end of his 25 years of service, he would get land.
[6:29] And if he wasn't a Roman citizen before he enlisted, he would automatically become one at the end of the 25 years.

There was great incentives to become a Roman soldier. It was a career with awards, or rewards, however you want to call it.
And it wasn't just open to anybody. A Roman soldier had to have good eyesight and good hearing.
And we can see that. It would be obvious, wouldn't it? It would have to be on the lookout for any trouble, and they would have to hear very clearly what people said.
So these men, as they're making their way to the cross, and when they get to the cross, they're alert. They're alert to every movement that's taking place around them.
[7:38] And they're also alert to every sound. They'll hear everything. Nothing's going to pass them by.

No doubt, they were very extra careful that day, because, well, it was the annual, it was connected to the annual Jewish remembrance of their great historical deliverance at the Passover, 2,000 years before then.
And thinking about their deliverance from a hostile oppressor in the past, it's kind of, it was always a danger.
It would stimulate them into expressing another rebellion at the annual celebration. And they would also perhaps be worried whether any of the comrades of the two men being crucified would try and rescue them.
But anyway, nothing happened. But we could say about them that their choice of profession led them to the cross.
[8:51] It's amazing where your profession can take you, isn't it? But there in their case, their profession took them to Calvary.

We sang there, that's the first point, profession, now prediction. We sang there in Psalm 22, incredible words.
And as we look at what the words say there in Psalm 22, we're told about these particular men.
It says there in verse 16, For dogs encompass me, a company of evildoers encircles me, they have pierced my hands and feet, I can count all my bones, they stare and gloat over me, they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.
As we look at that verse, we actually find, or sorry, in the previous verse 2, verse 18, where Jesus is speaking, at that moment, we're told about Jesus, My strength is dried up like a potsherd, my tongue sticks to my jaws.
[10:17] And I think we're to remember the state of his capacity for speech when he makes the prayer that we're going to think about.

At that moment, his strength was dried up like a potsherd, his tongue was sticking to his jaws.
Indeed, we're to remember that about all the so-called seven sayings of Jesus on the cross. None of them was easy for him to say, but yet he said them.
But anyway, this description of these, this prophecy of those individuals who are going to be involved in the crucifixion, we're told about them that they're dogs.
Jews. And what does that mean? Well, it just means that they were Gentiles. So these five men were not Jews, they were Gentiles.
[11:26] We're also told about them that they were gloating over Jesus. They were just staring at him and gloating over him at verse 17.

And of course, gloating suggests they're despising him. They're treating him with contempt.
And perhaps we can see that would be the case when they would nail above his head the king of the Jews. Some king you are.
But as we think about the prophecy, there's another aspect to it that seems obvious. one is that God's eye was on them.
God puts nothing superfluous in his word. And here he is, David wrote this psalm a thousand years before the crucifixion happened.
[12:31] And in that psalm, God mentions these five men. His eye is fixed on them in a general way.

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We know that. God knows where everybody is at any given time and so on. But he also looks at people in particular ways. And he had his eye on these five men.
And his eye was on them in such an extent that he guided David when he guided David to write about the crucifixion to write about these five men.
This psalm was sung thousands, millions of times down the centuries. And surely people as they sung it would have said, why are these men mentioned?
Is God going to punish them? them? Is God going to bless them? What are they mentioned for in this very dark psalm?
[13:47] And they are contributing to the darkness by their actions and the way they treat the victim. But God's eye is on them.

It's astonishing, isn't it? For God who has eye on people who are not going to be born for another thousand years. But of course we can extend that.
And we can say that God has eye on them. Always had it. Right throughout the whole history of time, however long that would be, and right throughout the whole of eternity before then, God's eye was on these five men.
Anyway, they crucified Jesus. And as we read about that, they crucified him, we discover that Jesus has got his eye on them. Jesus knew Psalm 22.
Jesus would have sung Psalm 22. And he knew what Psalm 22 was about.
[15:13] And he knew, I'm talking about his human knowledge, and as he went to the cross, he knew why he was going to die.

And he also knew that certain men would be there to crucify him. And he saw them that morning. it was a 45 minute walk from Pilate's house to Golgotha. And even if the Saviour struggled to carry the cross, it would not have delayed the journey that much.
So we can say that Jesus has seen these men for an hour. And in that hour, all he has seen in them is malice, cruelty, indifference.
And he's now experienced their personal contribution to his pain. He has watched them, or is watching them, putting the nails into his hands and his feet.
[16:47] And he prays for them. He doesn't cry out judgment on them.

He doesn't say to his father, punish them. He doesn't, as it were, add to the mystery of why these five people are mentioned in the Psalm 22.
He doesn't say, well, here's the answer. God is going to punish them. Instead, here is the answer. Jesus is going to pray for them.
And there he prays, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. it's a very specific prayer. I mean, some people try and suggest that this prayer is just a general one for everybody that's around the cross. But it doesn't look like that as far as the use of the English words is concerned.
[17:59] The they that's repeated and the them that's repeated in the verses refers to the same people to these five soldiers. Jesus wants these five men to be pardoned.

And as I said, it's a very surprising one because of the way they've treated him. But in his heart, well, you know, he had told his disciples, didn't he, pray for those who despitefully use you.
God tells us that in the Sermon on the Mount. And later on, we find that Stephen imitates the example of Jesus because when Stephen is being stoned by his opponents in the book of Acts, he prays for them.
And in doing that, he's imitating the example of Jesus. Now, there's an important, well, all important words there, but the word said, the verb said, and Jesus said, I mean, that verb is in the imperfect tense, which means that Jesus was repeatedly saying, Father, forgive them.
The imperfect, as I'm sure we know, describes a sequence of events in the past. And it could be translated as Jesus was saying.
[19:47] It wasn't just once that he said it. maybe it's just imagination, but maybe each time the hammer fell, he prayed, Father, forgive them.

But anyway, he repeated it, and the repetition of it suggests there's great intensity, doesn't it? It's not merely just a kind of general prayer that we may make at times when we ask God to bless people, or to forgive them, or something like that.
But there's real earnestness. It's almost as if he's saying that the only thing I want at this precise moment is for these five men to be pardoned, focused.

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And remember what Jesus is doing. And remember what he is experiencing. he's there to pay the penalty of sin, an experience that human words cannot describe.
But he's also there in intense agony. I mean, crucifixion was an awful form of death. It was designed to be as painful as possible.
[21:11] And here's the Savior. Savior. And it's not right to say that he is unaware of his sufferings, because he's fully aware of them.

But there's something affecting him more than his own sufferings, and that is his longing that these five men are pardoned.
love. And it's not just him thinking good of his neighbor. We're told to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.
And in a kind of way, these men were the neighbors of Jesus, because they were beside him. But it's not that kind of love that he's expressing. he has actually seen five men whose sins he's carrying.
And every sin they did to Jesus, every blow of the hammer as they nailed him to the cross, it was a sinful act.
[22:32] And at the moment that they were doing it, he was paying the penalty. Of course, Isaiah in Isaiah 53 had predicted, didn't he, that when he suffers on the cross, he'll make intercession for the transgressors.

And here's the Savior with his parched lips. with a mouth that he can hardly open. And he's repeatedly praying for these five men.
What an exhibition of love. And as we listen to Jesus saying this, of course, we're only hearing one side of the conversation.
he's not speaking to the soldiers, although he is speaking about the soldiers. He's speaking to his father. And he's, that's one side of the conversation, and the other side is the father hears it.
father hears and Jesus hasn't introduced to the conversation something that the father wouldn't want to hear. I mean, he would never do that.
[23:56] Anything he would say to the father would be pleasing to the father. after all, as has often been put, Jesus came out of the bosom of the father to show his love for sinners.

And here, as it were, he looks into the father's bosom, to the father's heart of love, and says to them, says to him, father, forgive them.
Jesus knows they deserve punishment, and in a certain sense, they're committing the worst sin of all, in a certain sense, because they are the five who crucified him.
But the father delighted to hear this petition from his own son. And as Jesus doesn't act independently, does he?
He doesn't say to these men, I forgive you. And he could have said that. He could have said to them, I would love you to be forgiven.
[25:16] them. But instead, he says, father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

He doesn't mean by mentioning their ignorance, that they didn't really know what they were doing in some senses. In another sense, they had no idea what they were doing.
They imagined that they were obeying the order of the most important man in the empire, Caesar's representative, as it were.
He had told them to do this, and they were not ignorant of that. Nor were they ignorant that crucifixion is a very cruel death.
They knew that. they had no idea that this man, whom they were crucifying, was the son of God.
[26:22] At least when they started the crucifixion. That's remarkable prayer, isn't it?

Father, forgive them. forgive them of every single sin they've committed. And who knows what is in their record.
But forgive them of this sin especially, what they're engaged in right now, of crucifying the son of God.
God. But there's a process, isn't there? That's our final point, a process.
And there were lots of processes at Calvary that day. Calvary is full of different processes. Unexpected processes, we might say.
[27:23] There's the process that happened to Simon of Cyrene, which we thought about a fortnight ago. He had no intention of going to Calvary, the last place on earth that he wanted to be.

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He would rather have been up at the temple, taking part in the now meaningless rituals that were still going on. But these soldiers, in a very surprising way, played a part in Simon's conversion. they didn't intend to, of course. It was just an expression of their authority that they had to compel a passerby to help out a crucifixion.
And then when they saw Simon coming, all they said is, he looks strong enough to carry the cross, he can do it. And they had no idea they were contributing to Simon discovering who Jesus is.
And there's the process of the happening to the man we call the converted criminal, converted thief. And again, I mean, who knows, but these soldiers were responsible for which one was on Christ's right and Christ's left.
[28:46] And it may have been easier, who knows, for the penitent criminal to address Jesus from the place where he was.

Who can say that these soldiers, in a sense, had put that man there. And they have heard him. Their good hearing, their necessary qualification for their profession, they'd have heard everything about the cross. And there's a process in their own minds.
And right away, nothing happens. Because we're told that when they finish crucifying Jesus, they start to gamble over his clothes.
And they gambled for the certain items that were outer clothing. But his inner tunic was one complete garment.
[30:01] So they didn't gamble for that. They just did the gamble that one of them would get it. The other parts of his clothing, they gambled to split it. with regard to the tunic, they gambled to want them to have it perfectly.

And so went on. And yet we read in Matthew, and it's quite interesting the way Matthew describes it, because Matthew says at least twice that people taunting Jesus on the cross said to him, said about him, he claims to be the son of God.
And yet at the end of the process, the Roman centurion were told, and the others with him, the other four men, they say certainly this was the son of God.
God uses processes, and as they were watching what took place on the cross, and they were prisoners of Pilate in this regard, because they couldn't leave it. And as they were watching what happened at the cross, they just got enlightened.
And at the end of the day, the five of them confess, and it's a, how many Roman soldiers on execution duty would at the end of the process, stand up and say, surely this is the son of God.
[31:46] If someone had suggested to them that they would be doing it at the end of the process on this day, they'd have dismissed the suggestion. That they saw what took place, they heard what took place, and while we can't go into their inner transformation, we can see the outward evidence of it.

I mean, they saw the Matthew mentions, and in a way he phrases it as quite intriguing as well, because at the end of his account, he tells the reader, he tells the reader in verse 51, and behold, after Jesus died, he says, and behold, and then he mentions five things that happened, and we're meant to behold the five of them, and the five things that he mentions is, the curtain is torn in two, the earth shook, the tombs are opened, and the centurion speaks.
It's a famous sermon by a preacher called James Boyce on the miracles at Calvary, and he talks about the curtain being torn, and the earthquake, and the resurrection of some of the saints, and so on, but he says, the greatest miracle is the miracle of these soldiers confessing that Jesus is the Son of God.
Christ. As we look at that, surely, we see the power of the intercession of Christ. And every convert has only been converted because Jesus prayed for them.
He either prayed for them when he was here on earth, or he prays for them in heaven. And that's his power. And it doesn't matter how unlikely they look.
[33:57] And we might say, but so and so, that it's impossible they'll be converted. Well, that use of the word impossible is never heard in heaven. There are some things that are impossible for heaven to do.

one of them is for someone to get there who hasn't believed in Jesus. As far as the degree of depth of a sinner, we can never say about them impossible.
Because who was more impossible than these five men? And as we think about it, what do we think of what happened to them?

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Do we see that while we may not have done the sin that they did on this occasion, we have all done enough sins to condemn us?
and do we have a longing in our heart to experience the same power of grace as these men did?
[35:24] There's no such thing as a small sinner. sinner. All of us are great sinner. We can go to the Jesus that was crucified at the cross, now alive, and alive, still full of desires for mercy.

And we can go to him personally and ask him to forgive us our sins. And if we do that, we'll get the same welcome as these men go.
They put Jesus to death. The sins of all those who trust in Jesus put him to death. But like these soldiers, we can be pardoned if we trust in him.
I trust we'll all do so. Shall we pray? Lord, we give you thanks for the story of the cross, for the soldiers who were captured by the dying Christ.
Help us, Lord, to marvel at the strength of his power, the power of the cross. We thank you for the efficacy of his prayers, and for the fact that he still intercedes.
[36:58] And we pray that you would hear our prayers, answer them, lead us, Lord, to pray for mercy. We thank you is available, and your mercy is great.

So bless us, we pray, for Christ's sake. Amen. We'll conclude by singing from Psalm 45a and sing Psalms.
Psalm 45a on page 56. We can sing verses 1-4. A noble theme inspires my heart with verses for the king, my tongue's a skillful writer's pen, composing lines to sing.
You far excel the best of men, your lips are full of grace, for God has blessed you evermore, as light shines on your face. Verses 1-4.
sing 1-4. A noble theme is part my heart with verses for the king.
[38:24] My tongue's a skillful writer's pen, composing lines to sing.

You far excel the best of men, your lips are full of grace, for God has blessed you evermore, evermore, his light shines on your face.
Almighty once up your and bite it on your thigh, thigh, with glorious splendor on your cell, and with your majesty.
■■ champion champion champion champion of all power and might.
May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

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