

**Phil. 2:5**

**Matt. 27:1**

**+In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+**

Just reading the Gospel today creates many responses. It leaves us quiet and pondering what this must have been like to all who watched. It elicits a sense of sorrow and sadness matched only by the overwhelming awe of such a set of events. It even tends to make us speechless, because it is so hard to know what to say in the face of this drama. Last week we *talked about* the meaning of sacrifice, BUT this day we walk through, see into, and feel that sacrifice. “See what love the Father has for us, that we should be called the Children of God,” says I John, and here is a picture of that Love.

Every year we hear this voicing of the Word of God, and I wonder how it strikes us?! St. Matthew paints a vivid picture of the events of Good Friday, but hidden within this overwhelming canvas is the very heart of the Good News. That may seem a contradiction, but it isn't. The Gospel comes from the lips not of the faithful, but of those who mock our Lord. “He saved others, but He cannot save himself” is said as derision by those taunting Him, but consider it for a moment. In that single phrase are the irony, paradox, and hope of the whole of our Christian Faith. If we hear this aright, it might make all the difference in the world.

“He Saved Others”...The word for save (soter) means to make whole, to alleviate suffering, to retrieve from darkness, to heal and to complete. To those listening on this day it must have recalled Jesus' healing of the blind and lame; His care for the poor and outcast; His raising of Lazarus; and even His feeding of the 5,000. In these events the Kingdom of God was felt, and the mercy of God was seen to be breaking in on history. It is a statement about all that He proclaimed and actually achieved. But Jesus is disturbing. He is a bit too mysterious, and divine. And in the taunting the crowd acknowledges that there are things about him that trouble them and us. He asks that we forgive those who do wrong to us. (even more than 7 x 70) He calls on us to give up self-service when it is what we would most want. He tells us the meek, not the aggressor, will inherit the earth. He changes water into wine and walks on water. Sometimes he seems

not quite human enough and it frightens his enemies and us, too. Yet in spite of all our questions and perplexities the claim still stands—**He Saved Others!!** And please notice one thing. St. Matthew writes this in such a way that it is clear he is not simply pointing to Jesus' past, but it is a statement about the very moment all are witnessing!! It is a statement about Jesus' present; about what is happening before their and our very eyes. Even on the lips of his mockers and enemies the Word which is God's action is being spoken and witnessed. "He Saved Others".

The other half of this phrase is crucial as well—"He Cannot Save Himself". This is hurled at Jesus as an insult. We thought you claimed to be the Son of God. Come on down and we will believe in you, which is precisely what Satan challenges Him to do in the wilderness!! What these words represent is the appearance of a Jesus who is a bit TOO HUMAN, too vulnerable and powerless, too exposed to suffering and mistreatment at the hands of others. The crowd fears this moment because it appears that God is absent. Have we not wondered the same in our own experiences? We like to think that we live in a world that is free from this type of cruelty, but deep down we know better, and we wonder why it happens and where is God when it does? What Matthew wants to make clear is that Jesus would not have been held to the cross by nails, UNLESS first He was held by His faithfulness to His Father!! This is the Supreme Sacrifice, for He dies on behalf of the very ones who hung Him on the Cross. "He Cannot Save Himself".

So what do we make of the mockery so crisply recorded by St. Matthew. Maybe we should be thankful for it because it gives voice to our questions, and yet these words tell us the Truth. Even in the depth and detail of the derision, we come to recognize that ALL are involved; Romans and Jews, criminals and good citizens, priests and followers—the whole world, even us. All stand before God's great action and are in some way impacted by it. Why do these people mock? Because they sense a Truth in a Person they have not created, cannot control, and which if taken seriously threatens to unhinge all their plans. And He does so to us as well.

"He Saved Others, But He Cannot save Himself" is the Gospel!! It is as if God has opened up for a moment a window into His own Heart and allows us to witness what a sacrifice of love looks like.

Today we begin the journey on the final week of Lent; Holy Week. We move with our Lord toward struggle, betrayal, injustice from the system, and common execution. Next Sunday is Easter, and if all this is wiped out by that day then our commemoration is meaningless and maybe even a bit foolish. But the writers of the N.T. spend far more time telling of these events than they do of Easter morning. Why? Because they knew full well that Easter's power and meaning could only be seen through the eyes of those who have suffered unfairly, maybe even through no cause of their own. And only when we follow the path of human struggle can Easter really unleash its full hope. So what do we do with the cross?

I am reminded that Moses died in old age on Mt. Nebo. The Buddha died in the arms of his wife as an old man. Many religious figures shared similar ends, but only we Christians have a Good Friday. Only we return every year to this historical event which makes a mockery of our central figure, and we claim it proclaims our clearest truth. Namely that the love God has for us is so powerful He will go through anything to give it to us. The cross is intimidating, unsettling, and mysterious, because it is not the way you and I would choose to do things. It remains our salvation, because it is the way God chooses. Amen+