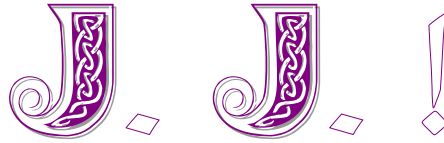


Sermon for the Sixth Wednesday in Lent, 28.iii.2007, 7:30 p.m. EDT
Saint Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church / New Bridgeville, Pennsylvania
Lenten Devotional Service
Isaiah 50: 4-9, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 23:1-49



The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke, the 23rd

Chapter:

23:1 Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.

23:2 They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."

23:3 Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so."

23:4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man."

23:5 But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

23:6 When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

23:7 And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

23:8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.

23:9 He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.

23:10 The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

23:11 Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.

23:12 That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other, before this they had been enemies.

23:13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people,

23:14 and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people, and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

23:15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.

23:16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

23:18 Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!"

23:19 (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)

23:20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again,

23:21 but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!"

23:22 A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him."

23:23 But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.

23:24 So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.

23:25 He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

23:26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

23:27 A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.

23:28 But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

23:29 For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.'

23:30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.'

23:31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

23:32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

23:33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

23:34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

23:35 And the people stood by, watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

23:36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,

23:37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

23:38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

23:39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

23:40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

23:41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

23:42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

23:43 He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

23:44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,

23:45 while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

23:46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

23:47 When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."

23:48 And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.

23:49 But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

Hear again verse 47 of tonight's Gospel, together with the accounts from Ss. Matthew, Mark and John:

Saint Luke: When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent" (23:47).

Saint Matthew: When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (27:54)

Saint Mark: And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (15:39).

Saint John: But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. 19:35 He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth--that you also may believe (19:34).

Have you ever wondered what became of that Roman army officer in charge of an execution detail that day? You may have seen Hollywood's answer to that question in several feature films, or you may have read that, in the High Middle Ages, the story of that soldier along with that of all Christian martyrs in the Roman armed forces—a huge number of them—were bundled together into a best-seller known as 'The Golden Legend,' one story after another of 'Christian knights,' beginning with our centurion, dubbed Saint

Longinus, and extending forward to semi-mythical King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and their search for the holy vessel, the 'Holy Grail' that contained the wine become the blood of Christ at the Last Supper. But, quite apart from and aside from the Golden Legend, the *Roman Martyrology*, based on local accounts of martyrdoms from all over the Christian world, also bears witness to the death of Longinus *without* reference to King Arthur, Sirs Galahad and Percival and all the rest.

This may all seem like rather fantastic stuff, especially to Protestants who are supposed to stick to the Bible and nothing but in their preaching, praying, reading and thinking. None of that, however, takes away from the Church's memory that that soldier

had a name, a name by which he was known from his Baptism onward, that he came from a certain part of the world, his earthly home, and that he gave up his life there rather than give up his faith in the God he had encountered at the foot of Christ, our Lord and his.

He was called by the Christian community at Jerusalem 'Longinus,' or, as we would say, 'Lance.' A *longinum* in Latin was the standard issue Roman cavalry lance, longer than the *pilum* issued to the foot soldier. As a commander over a troop of 100 foot soldiers, the centurion at the execution of Jesus and the other two condemned men would likely have carried a long lance for purposes of crowd control and as a badge of command.

A couple of years ago, the governor of Illinois issued an executive order suspending imposition of the death penalty because he was horrified that the judicial system was so imperfect that innocent men and women were being put to death for crimes they did not commit. The centurion in charge of Jesus' execution, according to all three Synoptic Gospels, experiences just such a moment of horror. It is a moment in which he realizes, on the one hand, that he has just executed an innocent man, according to Saint Luke's account. It is also a moment in which the centurion recognizes that this was no ordinary victim of the power of Rome, but that, as he confesses out loud in Matthew and Mark, that this was truly 'the' or 'a' *Son of God*. He says this as though it were

something exceptional, something extraordinary. Not only had Roman justice not prevailed that day, but something for which this Gentile occupier had no words had occurred. It was as though God's very own beloved son had been put to death in this terrible way, and yet, the dignity of this Jesus of Nazareth, of this alleged 'King of the Jews' had borne up under the weight of the cross and under the weight of His own poor body, hanging from hands and feet, now lifeless as the *longinum* is used to pierce His side.

The centurion's words come down to us over the vastness of time, echoing the Church's perennial attempts to put into words what only God Himself can say in His one Word, Jesus Christ. Longinus took his faith back with him to Cappadocia,

his native land, either rotated back there with his legion or pensioned off as a veteran. We know that Longinus was not alone, for Cappadocia, in what is now western Turkey, became the home of an extraordinarily large and extraordinarily tough Christian population, a people who built whole cities of interconnected houses and churches underground to withstand the repeated anti-Christian persecutions of the Roman state and military, and of the Roman military of its own members. That persecution claimed the life of Longinus, too, but not before he had passed his centurion's lance on to another officer and Christian, Mauritius, or Maurice. When Maurice's legion, the Theban Legion, made up entirely of Christians, was deployed from the Eastern Roman Empire to the

Province of Gaul in the West (present-day France and southwest Germany), they found out only after their arrival what their mission was to be. They were to root out and execute all the Christians of Gaul. Refusing this order, General Maximian ordered the 6,000-man legion to be 'decimated,' i.e., that every tenth soldier was to be executed. After the first 600 were thus martyred, the legion still refused to make sacrifice to the gods of Rome and to carry out the persecution of Christians. Another 'decimation' was ordered, and another and another and yet another, until the entire legion had been martyred. Before the final decimation was carried out, the *longinum* of Longinus was passed from Maurice to the Christian community of Gaul and sent from there back to the Eastern

Empire. Crusader tradition has it buried in Antioch and unearthed there by a poor monk and pilgrim, Peter Bartholomew, before the Crusaders withdrew from Antioch. And the story of the lance, a very much longer one than I have told you, goes on and on and on from there.

Of course, the details of the account given in the Roman Martyrology as well as many of the fanciful tales of those who came after the Crusaders can be questioned, but some things about it cannot and ought not to be questioned. The courageous deaths of thousands like Longinus and Maurice cannot be questioned, though. The incredible strength and resourcefulness of the Cappadocian Church cannot be questioned. What also cannot be questioned is the

horror, astonishment, awe and *faith* of a real-life person who stood closer to the cross of the dying Christ than any of His friends, than any of us would have wanted to under the actual circumstances, and who was astonished by, of all things, the *innocence* of this One Who hung now lifeless in the place of guilt and condemnation.

May the Holy Spirit of the Father Who speaks to us and moves us through His Onlybegotten, the Crucified, lead such unlikely saints and witnesses as ourselves pray in astonishment and to live by faith that such innocence has been offered up for the whole world, and even for us. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

