**Matthew 27:45-54 March 24, 2021**

**Lent Midweek 5 – Witnesses on the Road to Golgotha: Centurion**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we conclude our Lent Sermon series tonight looking at the Centurion and his bold and solid confession of Jesus as the True Son of God, I ask you, what makes a hero? Strength? Power? Conviction? We look at the heroes of our world as those who have possessed these strengths or obtained them through hard work and determination. We respect those who have always had heroic characteristics. But what about those who change sides? Those who go from bad to good as we saw last week the villain turned hero in the thief on the cross. This centurion has seen it before, a man beaten, bloodied, near death. He’s not actively seeking to kill Jesus, no…that was Caiaphas, that was Judas, that was even Pilate in some ways who just sort of lets this murder of an innocent man happen, for the Centurion he didn’t go out of his way to nail this man to the cross, it’s just his job. It’s what he does, no different than how you spend your days, it’s just something he does. But we remember him because he does change. Things change him, and he doesn’t ignore them. Signs and wonders after the death of Jesus Christ, change him but also, words. Words that challenge his preconceived notions and default positions on those accused and hanging to die. He hears Jesus. He changes. That’s what makes him heroic, he has growth and faith is created in his heart.

We find the centurion in our reading for tonight, standing at the foot of the cross. He heard it all: the contempt of the crowd, the prayer of Jesus for forgiveness for those who crucified Him, the confession of the thief and the absolution which Jesus spoke to him. He heard all of it. Perhaps he was one of the soldiers in Pilate’s court when Jesus was tried; but even if he wasn’t, he was able to read the inscription which Pilate placed over the head of Jesus: **JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS**. He had even heard some in the crowd say mockingly that Jesus had called Himself the Son of God. But he didn’t know how all of it fit together. And then Jesus died. Matthew wrote, “*Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.*” He wasn’t the only one who saw all of this, but of all those who witnessed these things, Matthew chose to focus his attention on this centurion. All of these things came together in the mind of this mid-ranking Roman soldier; and he said, “*Truly this was the Son of God.*”

As a Roman who had lived his life amidst an abundance of gods, his own conception of a deity would have been different than that of the Jews who were subject to Rome’s authority. Yet this centurion confessed Jesus as would a faithful child of the Old Testament covenant. The signs and wonders proved to him that Jesus was exactly who He claimed to be, and not one word that Jesus spoke went unheard. Not one word of Jesus returned to Him without doing the work for which He intended it. As the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, “*So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.*” On top of that, though every word they said was meant to be ridicule and scorn for the Man on the cross, everything said by the crowds and by Pontius Pilate to mock Jesus was true. Jesus is the King of the Jews. Jesus is the Son of God. The Roman centurion and his soldiers accepted by faith what the religious leaders of Israel, men who supposedly had spent their whole lives looking forward to the coming Messiah, did not believe: that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.

Why would this centurion believe when the leaders of Israel and their mob of followers would not? To answer that question, look to your own heart. Look to your own expectations of what the Messiah should be. You know what Scripture says about the Christ and what He came to do, just as the religious leaders in Jerusalem knew what the Old Testament promised about the Messiah. So what do you think? How should the Messiah act on your behalf? Should He cure your illnesses? Should He provide for you all that you want? Should He eliminate the things that trouble you? What kind of Messiah do you expect? What kind of Messiah do you want? For the leaders of the Old Testament religion, Jesus just wasn’t cutting it. The very presence of this Gentile centurion at what should have been a religious trial and execution was proof that Jesus wasn’t the kind of Messiah they thought a Messiah should be. Apparently Jesus had not come to deliver them from the power of their Roman conquerors. Apparently He had not come to return Israel to a golden age like they had been waiting for since the reign of King Solomon. All Jesus did was heal the sick, raise the dead, forgive sins, and preach the Gospel to a people who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness. This was not the Messiah they expected or wanted.

Look to your own heart. This happens every year. We start Lent services with more than we seem to find at the end of these services. It gets old, doesn’t it, all this talk about forgiveness and grace and love. The cross is over two-thousand years old now, just as the promise of the Messiah was thousands of years old to the religious leaders who sought the death of their King. Has the shine worn off? Is salvation stale? Has the Lord’s Supper gotten boring? Repetitive? After all, next week on Holy Week we will commune Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Easter Sunday? Shouldn’t we limit it down? Make it more special? Should we refrain from confession and absolution so that we don’t take forgiveness for granted? Maybe we shouldn’t baptize infants; maybe we should wait until they’re older so they understand what’s happening to them. Maybe it’s all just become old, outdated, and boring.

Maybe it was easier for the centurion and his soldiers. After all, they didn’t have any preconceived notions about what a Messiah should be. They didn’t even know what a Messiah was. But somehow, when God spoke to them—both in the Word of Christ and through the signs and wonders they witnessed—the Holy Spirit worked faith in them, and they confessed Jesus for who He really is: the Son of God. And though the cross of Christ is over two-thousand years old, the forgiveness and salvation Jesus won for you on that cross remains fresh and new. They still speak to you today. Jesus is the Passover Lamb, the One who died so that the new Israel of the Church should not perish. He is the One who allowed His innocent blood to be betrayed into the hands of sinners, the One whose blood cleanses you from all unrighteousness. He is the One in whom no fault could be found, for He lived the sinless life that you could not live. He is the One who bore your sins to the cross, speaking the word of Holy Absolution to you while He was still hanging on that cross.

Truly, this is the Son of God; for though He hung on that cross twenty centuries ago, His redeeming work is as powerful today as it was on that dark Friday on Golgotha. He returns you to His cross in Holy Baptism, where you die with Him in sin; and in that same Baptism He raises you to new life. God does not change. The Word of God endures forever. Holy Baptism does not need your understanding to make it effective; it bestows faith. Holy Absolution removes your sins every time you confess those sins and repent of them, no matter how many times it happens. The body and blood of Jesus in the Holy Supper are a life-giving feast, no matter how many times you have received it. Even if it’s multiple times in the same week.

Truly, Jesus is the Son of God. Though you do not see Christ on the cross, though you do not feel the earth shake or see the Temple curtain torn in two or the opening of the tombs of the saints, you have the faithful testimony of the centurion. And as we conclude this journey, we also can see how we learn from all the witnesses on the road to Golgotha. Some the good on how to act and how to be heroes of the faith, some the bad on how sin can take hold and turn them into villains. But we give thanks to God for all witnesses who spoke faithfully of Jesus and the truth of the salvation He won for you.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.