

When Evil Comes Too Close to Me

Sermon for Good Friday

Sermon Text: Luke 23:33-49



³³ 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. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide His garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up and offering Him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over Him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." ⁴³ And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise." ⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!" And having said this He breathed His last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all His acquaintances and the women who had followed Him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

In these days and weeks, terrible pictures reach us again. They are pictures of people who lie helplessly at the edge of society. They were murdered. Mothers stand on the side of the road and scream their powerlessness to heaven, in the background is a mass grave. We still don't know how many dead there are. How can it be that our world has suddenly become so evil? And who is it that did this? The shocking fact is this: They were ordinary people. They were people whose mothers, wives, and children wait at home for their beloved son or husband. They were "normal" people. How can it be that "normal" people do something terrible like that? And where does this evil even come from? Can it also be found inside ourselves? That is a troubling question that challenges the very foundations of our self-understanding. How can I be certain that I won't suddenly become a monster? These are questions that may frighten us deeply. Psychologists say it, historians prove it, the conscience hints at it – the Bible tells us so too, indeed, for people it is truly so – Evil is normal.

In the events of Good Friday, the question of evil is dramatically painted before our eyes. An innocent person must suffer a terrible death. The wrongdoers, the spectators, the other accused ones stand around the One being crucified and can't believe it. But God is also there. This event at the cross challenges us in a special way because what happened there involves every one of us personally. My fate and your fate were decided there. Golgotha...who am I on this mountain? And how will I return home when this day is over? Where is my Golgotha?

Are you a wrongdoer? Of course not, that thing about the cross is an improbably horrifying story that I would rather not explain to my children. I actually avoid all violence and point my finger at the people who violate human rights. From a safe distance, I can get upset about Putin, about the Russians, about anyone else. It feels good to find out about the bad people so that you can distance yourself from them. You can say that you have nothing to do with it yourself. But is that true? No, not at all. I am somehow still involved, whether I want that or not. Even as a spectator, I'm involved. Even as a non-perpetrator, I become a perpetrator as well precisely because of my inaction. And just by being part of the gas and energy supply chain, I also contribute to the fact that people must die. No, we can't have a clean slate. Evil is not just in distant countries; it is like a disease. It grows and spreads everywhere – first secretly and then it hits mercilessly. If you ignore it, it quietly and secretly proliferates before suddenly and mercilessly destroying everything around it. The spectators stand next to Jesus' cross. They were in the majority. They didn't flog Jesus or torture Him or drive nails through His hands. They just watched. There were many onlookers. There are officers as well as the people, and Jesus' friends stand at a distance and watch. He was the "most despised" as Isaiah foretold. It just wasn't nice to watch. But what we see there is not just the physical agony. We see especially the spiritual agony for the power of evil is now upon Him, everything focused on Him. The blood that cries out to heaven from the beginning of world history, now screams in His ears – sometimes with mockery, sometimes with extreme hatred, and sometimes with great slander, as well as the rebellion of people against God. Everything now laid upon His shoulders. He was forsaken by God.

And yet God was not far away. He is right there. According to Biblical reports, God Himself is there with His plan. The Gospels even tell us that the plans and actions of the people around the cross are secondary actors. The whole thing was even wanted by God. God Himself wasn't impassive...He is the central player. God came so close to the evil that you could even mistake Him for the evil. He even put Himself in the place of the evil. He humiliated Himself. And so, some ask: what kind of God is it who doesn't even shy away from afflicting and killing His own Son.

But you can only say that if you are of the opinion that God is different than the One hanging on the cross. God came so close to evil that He Himself is there. He is the victim and the lawbreaker at the same time. If He is a lawbreaker, it is not out of cruelty but because He faces evil. And if He is a victim, it is for one reason only – out of great love for us! There we see Him. The Judge of the world on the cross! He who determines and decides the fate of the people in all the world, He who is Himself without sin and can decide who must be condemned and who is not, it is He who hangs upon the cross. There is a small peculiarity here – in the time of Jesus, it was customary for the High Priest to say something for the man being executed. The executed man had to first submit a confession of guilt. He had to say something like: "My death is a punishment for..." Then the High Priest granted absolution. Christ, the Judge of the world, had no sins for which to repent. Sin can't accuse Him. We also don't hear that the High Priest gave absolution to Jesus. No High Priest dared to do so. Instead, Pontius Pilate says: "This Man is not guilty." But now, something amazing happens. Even hanging on the cross, Jesus steps in as the High Priest. Despite bitter pain, His prayer on the cross is not for Himself – even in His death He stands in solidarity with sinners, even with the sinners who want to kill Him – He prays as the Judge of the world and at the same time as the High Priest. He prays for them and asks God to forgive them "for they know not what they do!" But He doesn't just pray for those who do not know what they are doing. He prays for everyone, even for those who knowingly planned and carried out His death. He also prays for the many who are guilty of His death. He also prays for us guilty ones because in the end, all sinners are

responsible for His death. We can only understand the wonderful thing about this prayer when we know Who intercedes like this. Jesus is God's Son and at the same time, the Judge of the world. But as the Judge of the world, He asks for forgiveness. And then there is another who was truly guilty. It is the thief on the cross. In agony on the cross, he confesses his sins. He doesn't ask the Judge of the world and the High Priest to spare him from the agony. He says, "When You come into Your kingdom..." He asks that he may attain eternal salvation through judgment. And Jesus granted the dying man Heaven, as only Jesus can. He doesn't ask for deliverance from death. He asks for his salvation. The Judge of the world and the High Priest pronounces forgiveness: "today, you will be with Me in paradise."

Where are we in this story? Are we bystanders? Are we those who are already in this story? Maybe born into it as children? Are we those who mock and laugh? Maybe even those who have honest questions about it all. But we came and as we came, we shall certainly not return.

Around 3:00pm, one hears the Temple brass sound. They invite people to evening prayer. Jesus joins in with this evening prayer and prays the 31st Psalm: "into Your hands I commit My spirit." And then Luke reports what happened to the bystanders. They beat their breasts and returned home, he says briefly. This doesn't just mean that they returned home after the circus, rather it means that life has taken a completely different direction. They came as spectators, they left as victims. Some who were there, like the Roman officer, spontaneously began to praise God. What happened within them? They noticed that the earth on Golgotha was shaking and all of this touched them personally. There, on the hill, it's about me. It's about the evil that stirs in my heart and which I can't deal with at all on my own. The point is that there on the cross, a key to a heavy door is turned and the gate to heaven is opened. The point is that the cherubim who guard heaven, now stand invitingly before us and take us inside.

He said it – Today you will be with Me in paradise. Amen.