

<b>Mark 15:16-20</b>	<b>Midweek 5</b>
<b>Forgive Us for Despising Our Savior's Claim!    The Roman Soldiers</b>	

**The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.**

**"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34).** I wonder whether the soldiers who crucified Jesus were at all taken aback to hear such words from the man on the cross. We can well imagine that any victim of crucifixion who still had breath to speak was more likely to utter curses on the men nailing his hands and feet to the wood than to pray for their pardon. But the soldiers heard this man asking for their forgiveness because **"they *did not know what they were doing.*"**

I bet they would have said that that they knew exactly what they were doing. They were bringing Roman justice to this arrogant preacher who had gone around claiming that he was a king. What were they supposed to do? Quake in fear before the great descendant of David, some stupid Jewish folk hero from a misty past whose descendants had lost their kingdom long ago? Cry into their pillows at night that the great bogeyman, the Jewish Messiah, was going to get them in the darkness? Shiver in their boots at this man whose own people wanted nothing at all to do with him anymore, whose own priests had turned him over to the Romans because even they recognized that he was a monumental nothing?

Oh, they were sure that they knew what they were doing. And we know how wrong they were! How can they hope to escape the lowest pit of hell on the day of final judgment? They tortured the Son of God and manufactured impromptu cruel mockeries of him. They spit in his face! How will such an insult be dealt with on the Day of Judgment?

Not one of us wants to be standing anywhere in the vicinity of those soldiers on the day Jesus Christ returns in his glory, wearing a crown, not of thorns but of divine authority. And that is why we must beware of even our slightest drifting in their direction. Now, we protest quite strongly that we would never join in their mocking and disrespect. But we do; we do when we don't know what we are doing. And when that happens, we must catch ourselves quickly and pray to God:

**Forgive Us for Despising Our Savior's Claim!**

Why would the soldiers be so especially cruel to this one man? Consider the times in which they lived and the ruthlessness of the empire they served. We know it was Roman policy to humiliate and torture the condemned. The scourging the condemned had to undergo was known as *“the little death,”* and the pain and agony would not let up until they breathed their last. But even beyond that, those who earned the punishment of the cross were to be put on public display, nearly naked, pinned to the wood, bleeding and gasping and dying for all to see.

But with Jesus, there was more. His case seemed to call forth an even greater kind of cruelty than did, for example, the cases of the two criminals who were crucified at his right hand and at his left. No crown of thorns adorned their heads; no scornful bowing was performed in front of them. With Jesus, though, the Roman soldiers seemed determined to treat him as the greatest of fools.

The soldiers could really get into it with him because they didn't take a thing about him seriously. Everyone knew about his triumphant entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week. The Romans knew about all the Jews on hand for the great Passover festival, who had hailed Jesus and had shouted out that he was the Son of David, the great Messiah, the King of the Jews.

*“Some king,”* the soldiers thought. Where were his armies? Where was his glorious crown? Where was his regal robe? Where was his scepter? Was this fool of a carpenter the best that Judea could come up with for a king? And by mocking him, they also mocked the rebellious people of his nation. They let every single Jew see what the legions of Rome thought about their bragging about being the chosen people of God with a Messiah-King to lead them to everlasting glory. What a joke!

What led the Romans to such a cynical attitude? There was, of course, their attitude as conquerors that made them despise anything that was not Roman. Who, after all, had stood against their legions anywhere in the world? Rome was the superpower of the day, and its soldiers were the greatest warriors that the world had ever seen. They looked down on anyone and everyone.

To such men, everything about Jesus of Nazareth was a big joke. *“King of the Jews”* sounded like foolishness to them since there was no ruler but Caesar and his legions. Judea was conquered territory. As for all the fuss the Jews made about this man and their God? How could the great Romans care any less about the loser religion of a loser nation? To them all the grand, religious debate surrounding Jesus was just foolishness.

And that is why there was a crown of thorns and a scepter to beat him with and a rough cloak thrown over his torn and bloody back. **They began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.**

The same attitude is rampant in the world around us, where Jesus' claims and his Word's claims are despised everywhere. This same attitude is seen in those who mock the ideas of our religion. Think of those who feel they are the wise and learned of our age, who feel we are so foolish to believe what is in the Bible. Think of those who believe we are enemies to all the things they care about, like the freedom to sin as much as they wish in any way that they wish. Think of those who have become so jaded about life itself that they feel contempt for anyone who, like us, think there is a deeper meaning to life.

The results of this cynicism can be seen all around us. Consider the college professor who feels it is his called duty to argue and ridicule the Christianity out of any believing student who happens to enroll in his class and his audacity to boast about it. We can be certain that such a person is not alone. Such an attitude is also seen in the contempt with which our religion is often treated in books and entertainment or in the constant whining of people who tell us to shut up and keep our religion to ourselves.

We even find ourselves tempted to edge toward such an attitude. As we know too well, there are times when life would be easier for us without the weight of a two-thousand-year-old religion hanging around our necks. Sometimes we just don't want to be the one who is being made fun of for our beliefs. Sometimes our faith demands something we don't really want to do or condemns something we'd really like to be doing. And it is then, especially, that the siren call of the cynics seems strongest. It is then, especially, that the temptation comes for us not to take all this religion stuff so seriously, but to grow up and join the 21st century like everyone else.

If that kind of thought starts up in your head or your heart, stamp it down immediately. It is worse than irreligious; it is foolish. It is the beginning of the sin of idolatry, really; it is replacing our Lord and our God with ourselves. We become the foundation of our lives and will eventually let no one claim to have any authority over us. Before we get that close to the cynical legionnaires in ancient Jerusalem, let us pray fervently, *"Father, let Jesus be the foundation of our lives."*

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The trouble with those soldiers was that they had based their lives on something less than what God holds out for us. Remember how Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount, talking about building your house on the rock or on the sand? The soldiers couldn't tell the difference. Everything God wanted them to base their lives on, the place he had prepared for them to stand forever, had no appeal to them. *"Repent and believe in Jesus Christ!"* That is the solid ground. But to those foolish men, it seemed worse than sand.

Repentance was not even in their vocabulary because they didn't believe that they had really done anything horribly wrong—even when they tortured their victims, they felt it was perfectly justified. Running about with guilt on their backs all the time? That was no way for anyone to live, especially a soldier who sometimes has to do things that would freeze the consciences of lesser men. These Romans had

no room for any Ten Commandments. These foolish Jewish writings were of no use to the masters of the world. To them, it was all silliness.

But we know much better than they did what our place in the world is. We, who are citizens of a modern superpower, might be tempted to feel as arrogant as the Romans did. But we—at least, we Christians—have learned better at the feet of our God.

We know our place. And what is that? On the one hand, we are merely creatures put here by a God who has every right and authority to demand our obedience to his laws. This means we have no call on deciding that one or any of these laws don't really apply to us. We don't have the right to decide that this or that commandment can't really fit into our lives in this time and this place. God's code is for all time. This means that we must approach his laws with the greatest respect and trust—trust that the Lord God knows better than we do how we ought to lead our lives.

But that is only on the one hand. On the other hand, we are much, much more! We are the redeemed children of God through faith in Christ. The reason Jesus was in the hands of those sadistic mockers was to save us from our sins. Through his suffering and crucifixion he wiped away all our guilt and made us the sons and daughters of the Almighty. We know that **“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7).**

This means that out of love for him and out of respect for our Redeemer's wishes—and with full and absolute trust in his wisdom—we will gladly obey his Word. We understand how great a claim he has on us as our Savior, our God, and our King. How could we deny that we belong to him who paid so great a price to make us his own?

We will no longer look at ourselves in the way the world looks at itself but will see the greatness of the claim Jesus Christ has on us. We now belong to him, not to ourselves. We are his people in this world, put here to do his will as it is clearly recorded in his Word.

Christ and his Word, then, are the very foundation of our entire lives. But this is not some burdensome and unwelcome imposition upon us. Rather, we are glad and honored to be the servants of this great King. **“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,”** Jesus once said, **“for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29).** How could anything but Jesus Christ and his Word be the foundation on which we build our lives?

He is denied and mocked by many, but we pray that he may always be honored and acknowledged by us. The Roman soldiers had no time for his claim that he was the King of the Jews, and they made it clear in the shameful way they treated him. But we bend our knees before him who shed his blood to save us from hell and to make us his own. We gladly confess him as King and pray for the strength to obey his Word. Let all the world mock or ignore his claim, but we pray, *“Heavenly Father, make us Jesus' thankful subjects in his wonderful kingdom of grace. Make him the foundation of our lives! Amen.”*