

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 23:33-43

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The story of Jesus' crucifixion and his dialogue with the criminals who were crucified with him resonates with the stories of the great war epics in the ancient world. One of the major motifs in the battle stories of antiquity are the taunts that are given between various adversaries. In the story of David and Goliath, Goliath taunts the soldiers of Israel: "Send out a man who will fight with me, you cowards!" He mocks them. When David comes out to fight Goliath, he in turn taunts Goliath and says, "The Lord God will give you into my hand and I will cut off your head!" This is in response to Goliath saying, "What, have they sent out a little flea to fight with me?" These taunting speeches are part of the warrior stories of antiquity.

Another example are the stories of the Iliad and the classic battle between Achilles and Hector. I'll read you just a part of the speeches, the taunts that Hector and Achilles have before their battle. Hector after running three times around the city of Troy with Achilles chasing him, finally stands his ground with the encouragement of the Goddess Athena and speaks:

'Son of Pilius, I will no longer run from you. As before you I fled three times around the great city of Priam and dared not stand. But now my spirit in turn is driven to stand and face you. I must take you now or I must be taken. Come then, shall we swear before the gods for these are the highest that shall be witnesses and watch over our agreements. Brutal as you are, I will not defile you if Zeus grants to me that I can wear you out and take the life from you. But after I have stripped your glorious armor Achilles, I will give your corpse back to the Greeks. Do you do likewise?' And then looking darkly at him, swift footed Achilles answered, 'Hector argue me no agreements. I cannot forgive you as there are no trustworthy oaths between men and lions, nor wolves and lambs. These spirits cannot bring into agreement forever these old feelings of hate for each other. So there can be no love between you and me nor shall there be oaths between us. But one or the other must fall before then to glut with his blood. Aries is the God who fights under the shield's guard. Remember every valor of yours for now the need comes hardest upon you to be a bold warrior. There shall be no more escape for you but Athena will kill you soon by my spear. You will pay in a lump for all those sorrows of my companions you killed in your spear's fury.'

The Iliad is full of such speeches. In Luke's story, there is a litany of taunts directed to Jesus. First the leaders scoffed at him. They mocked him saying, "Ah, he saved others. Let him save himself if he is the Messiah, the Son of God, his chosen one." The Roman soldiers also mocked and taunted him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you're the king of the Jews, save yourself." And then even one of the criminals who was hanging there with him kept mocking him and saying, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save

yourself and us." This story of Jesus' death is full of the taunts that were the mainstay of the stories of battle in the ancient world.

In reporting these mocking cries, it is fully appropriate to convey your attitude and feeling about what these opponents of Jesus are saying. The tragedy of this mistreatment of a righteous man can be communicated by the tone of your voice. This double-layered storytelling presents both the disdain and mockery of Jesus' taunters and your attitude toward what they are doing.

Jesus' words by contrast to these violent words that precede violent acts, are quiet: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And the words of the one crucified with him are words spoken in the context of a relationship that is being established. It is not unlike the appeal of Hector to Achilles, that they would honor each other and that whoever was victorious would not defile the body of their adversary. In this case, Jesus does not respond as Achilles or as Hector. In response to this criminal, who asks him to have mercy on him, Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus offers him mercy, forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

There is a verbal thread that runs through these three taunts against Jesus, the word to "mock" or "ridicule." The leaders taunt him as the Messiah of God: "Let him save himself, if he is the Messiah of God." The Greek word here means to ridicule or sneer. The soldiers taunt: "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." The word that is used to describe their taunt means "to mock." The culmination of the taunting is the taunting of one of the criminals crucified with Jesus. The Greek word that is used for the criminal's words means "to blaspheme." In Israel, blasphemy was a crime punishable by death. The translation "deriding him" does not capture the quality of this blasphemous taunt by the one who is crucified with him. He also mocks him as a Messiah: "Aren't you the Messiah, huh, save yourself and us." This story is a crescendo of taunts first by the rulers, then by the Roman soldiers, and finally by the ones crucified with him. A recommendation is to tell this story in a way that expresses this tradition of taunting.

The other criminal rebukes the one who blasphemed Jesus and compares Jesus' fate to theirs. They were suffering because of their crimes, but he had done nothing wrong. This is the third time in Luke's story in which Jesus' innocence is emphasized, another major theme that runs through the story. This other criminal rebukes the one who mocks Jesus and then turns to Jesus as they are dying and says to him, "Jesus remember me. Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus' response is a promise of mercy and fellowship in Paradise. In effect it acquits him of guilt and promises eternal salvation. It is also an implicit victory over death and a promise to the one dying with him of that same victory.

Now a comment about the promise, "You will be with me in paradise." The word "paradise" also appears in 2 Corinthians 12:4 and in Revelation 2:7. It is often thought to be the equivalent of heaven, but that is not so. This word in Greek means an enclosed park or garden. It is used to translate the Garden of Eden. It developed in association with

the "last things" as a place of expected bliss, as the mythical place or abode of the righteous after death. It was the opposite of Hades, the place of descent for the souls of dead warriors. Jesus' promise to the one crucified with him is that they will be in this beautiful park, this great garden: paradise.

One impact of this story is sympathy for Jesus, who is dying as an innocent man. There is also an implicit affirmation of his kingship. However, in the context of the stories of the ancient world, it is Jesus' difference from the warrior tradition that is most striking. In his death Jesus is stronger than the warriors of the ancient world. The most direct and personal promise of life after death is for those who ask Jesus for mercy and forgiveness.

Thus, the climax of this story is the conversation between Jesus and the criminal who asked him for mercy. We as listeners are invited to listen in on this intimate discussion between Jesus and one of the criminals who was crucified with him and to recognize Jesus' courage, strength, and unwillingness to enter into the taunts of warfare. Instead he wins the victory over death by his quiet courage and strength and his forgiveness of this criminal. This story communicates hope and promise for all those who suffer from the consequences of their own misdeeds, but also for the world as it struggles to find a way that would lead to peace. Jesus' words on the cross point the way to the fulfillment of the hope for peace, not through the way of the warrior but through the Messiah's way of forgiveness and reconciliation.