

Are You Not the Christ?

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, Luke 23:26-56 (ESV)

January 8, 2006

“Are you not the Christ?” Therein lies the question posed by and at the crucifixion of the Christ, here articulated by a criminal himself crucified. “Are you not the Christ?” The question expresses some wonderment. It betrays some confusion. It leads into some difficulties. But it is the right question. Finally someone says it out loud. And Luke has recorded it for our edification. “Are you not the Christ?” The question is asked in such a way as to expect a positive answer. Yes, he is the Christ! Yes, he is! He is the Christ despite the crucifixion. That is the source of the confusion. Indeed, he is the Christ by virtue of the crucifixion. That is the cause of the wonderment. Thanks be to God!

“Are you not the Christ?” The affirmation lying behind this question is called into question by the context of the question. How could the Christ be crucified? How could the Anointed one of God be killed? How could the Savior not be saved? How could the Victor be defeated? How could the Healer of all diseases be hanging on a cross? How could the Teacher be silenced? How could the One of whom the angels sang, the One whom Mary bore, the One whom the shepherds came to see, how could this one meet such an untimely end? What about the kingdom without end? What about good news of great joy for all the people? What about peace on earth among those with whom he is pleased? What about good news to the poor? What about liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind? What about the new covenant? Did not the crucifixion call all of this into question?

“Are you not the Christ?” It was a cry of desperation, really. The poor criminal was probably misled by all the disbelief being voiced around him. “The rulers scoffed at him [Jesus], saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!’ The soldiers also mocked him [Jesus], coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” It was to their voices that the criminal added his own, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” It is no accident that all their voices echoed that of the devil, who earlier had tempted Jesus by saying, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” The devil, the rulers, the soldiers, and one of the criminals were united in making sport of Jesus and in insisting that he come down from the cross. This, of course, was the one thing he would not do.

“Are you not the Christ?” Right assumption. Right question. Wrong conclusion. Yes, he was the Christ. But no, he would not save himself. No, no, no,

no, no! He would not save himself. He could do many things. But the one thing he would not do was save himself. If he had saved himself, he would have ceased to have been the Christ. And then he could not have saved us. So it was a terrible choice. He did not come down from the cross and did not save himself. Instead, he stayed on the cross and died so that he could fulfill his office as the Christ and save us.

“Are you not the Christ?” Right assumption. Right question. And the other criminal made the right conclusion. The second criminal rebuked the first one, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” That, by the way, is a confession of sin and a profession of faith. Even the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion concurred, praising God and saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” “Do you not fear God?” Somehow, in the midst of the gore, in the midst of the mockery, in the midst of the pain and confusion, this second criminal realized that the appropriate response to the crucifixion of the Christ was to fear and to honor God. Something holy was happening there. The servant of the Lord was taking on the sin of the world. The one who had done nothing wrong was taking on the gonewrongness of the rest of us. Christ chose not to save himself. Christ chose instead to die so that you and I may live.

“Are you not the Christ?” Yes, he is the Christ. Yes, he is. Right assumption. Right question. And this second criminal arrived at the right conclusion. And then on the basis of his faith, he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” What a wonderful prayer! “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” With this, he acknowledged Jesus as King. He placed his well being in the hands of the suffering Christ. He placed his hope in the resurrection yet to come. He refused to mock Jesus as did the others who asked him to do the one thing he would not do. He chose instead to honor Christ by trusting him to do the one thing he came to do. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“Are you not the Christ?” Jesus said to this second criminal, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” You see, Jesus is the Christ not only because he was born at Bethlehem and not only because he was raised on Easter but also and especially because he refused to save himself, refused to come down from the cross, refused to avoid the suffering, refused to avoid death, and chose instead to suffer and to die for you and for me, on our account, in order that he might forgive our sin, and in order that we might live. As Isaiah had written of him centuries earlier:

Surely he has borne our griefs

and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

As John Calvin pointed out of this passage and so of the crucifixion centuries afterward, a wonderful exchange occurs here between Christ and us. Christ willingly suffered insult and mockery to make us stand before God pure and unstained. Christ endured all the ugliness of the crucifixion to restore the image of God to us. Christ was thrown out of the city onto Golgotha so that we might be taken into the kingdom of God. Christ was stripped of his clothes so that we might be clothed with the garments of righteousness. Christ endured being counted among the wicked in order to bring us into the company of holy angels. All that he took upon himself was a relief to us. It was for our sake and for our salvation that the Son of God willed to stay on the cross and to endure torment, agony, and death. There is a wonderful exchange here, in which Christ takes on the curse in order that we might be forgiven.¹ Let us never neglect or be ungrateful for these benefits.

In a few minutes, the session of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church will ordain and install into office several people elected to serve the church of Jesus Christ as elders and deacons. The key word here is “serve.” Even as Jesus fulfilled his office of Christ by being a servant of the Lord, so are we who are ministers, elders, and deacons to fulfill our offices by being servants of the Lord. We are not here to lord it over others. We are not here for the honor. We are not here for the prominence. We are here to serve. And the pattern of our service, the standard for our lives, has been set by the life, ministry, and service of our Lord and Master

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 3: *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, Vol. III and The Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 3:189-199.

Are You Not the Christ?

Jesus Christ. We cannot and need not repeat Christ's sacrifice. He was sinless, and we are not. We cannot and need not add anything to Christ's sacrifice. It was perfect and complete. And yet, we are called to follow him in the paths of service and even, if necessary, in the paths of suffering. We covet your prayers.

"Are you not the Christ?" Therein lies the question posed by and at the crucifixion of the Christ, here articulated by a criminal himself crucified. The question expresses some wonderment. It betrays some confusion. It leads into some difficulties. But it is the right question. Finally someone says it out loud. "Are you not the Christ?" The good news is that yes, he is the Christ! Yes, he is!

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org