



John 19:23–24

23 When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 24 ‘Let’s not tear it,’ they said to one another. ‘Let’s decide by lot who will get it.’ This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said,

‘They divided my clothes among them

and cast lots for my garment.’

So this is what the soldiers did.

Reflection

(Today’s reflection is given by Dylan Chalwell).

At the start of the *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck’s novel, we get a picture a land that is spluttering to death. It’s the 1930s. We’re in the prairieland, where the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas kiss. Dustbowl country. The wafer-thin topsoil has turned into fine dust that blows away and settles on towns like a dense fog.

Nothing grows.

Over-farming caused it. The combine harvesters, the tractors, the farmers. They killed their source of life.

Here we have that, but in cosmic proportions. Verse 23 begins our text today: “When the soldiers crucified Jesus.” I want to talk about the context, the passage itself, and then the response that God invites us into under three headings: a sneering coronation; a surprising combination; a subdued celebration.

Firstly, the context: a sneering coronation. Notice that throughout the trial and crucifixion, the religious and civil authorities have played Jesus for laughs. In 18:39, Pilate presents him to the crowds: “Do you want me to release ‘the king of the

Jews’?” In 19:2, as he is flogged the Romans soldiers twist together a crown of thorn as they beat him. They drape a purple robe over his bloodied body – the colour of royalty. In 19:3 they hail him as a king as they strike him in the face. When Pilate presents him to the Jewish crowds again, he announces him as “the king of the Jews” (19:14). When he has him crucified, a notice is prepared: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (19:19). This is the Roman equivalent of an Adam Sandler movie: crass comedy at the expense of a bloody, broken man. But there is a political edge, too: Pilate has staged a mock coronation. So there is a cruel nuance to the joke. By presenting Jesus as the king promised by God but here bloody and broken by the Roman machine, he is asserting the agency of the empire. Look who is

really in control.

But our passage today suggests that we really see here is a surprising combination. You see, here we have a hint that - little do the authorities know – but they are not asserting the agency of the empire at all. Instead, they are inadvertently fulfilling God’s plan. As the guards decide not to tear Jesus’ cloak but instead decide by lot who gets to keep it, they probably think that they have all the power. This is happening all because Rome has decreed it. But no: John gives us a glimpse of what is going on: “This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled that said, ‘They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.’”

And then, emphatically, to assert that God

is the one with ultimate power and agency and authority, despite all appearances to the contrary, John repeats himself:

“So this is what the soldiers did.”

God is co-opting the decisions of evil for his own purposes. He will subvert them. He will turn their weight against them, like a master Judo player. They think that they are playing out the story of Rome; little do they know that they are actually playing out the story of God’s promised king.

It is in the quotation that we find the surprising combination. I’ll read it again:

“This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled that said, ‘They divided my clothes among them and

cast lots for my garment.’

This transports us back into an older story, a bigger story than the story of Rome’s domination. It takes us back to the time of David, shepherd, King, poet. John has lifted this phrase from Psalm 22, a song written by King David at a time of utter forsakenness and personal turmoil. If you read the psalm, feel the weight of the verbs: David “cries”; he is poured out like water; his strength is dried up; his hands are pierced. Here we are introduced to a key idea in the Scriptures: the true king of Israel will suffer. That’s the surprising combination. Our picture of divine kingship has been too shaped by pictures of Zeus sending down lightning bolts from the comfort of his cloud. The Scriptures always point to a king who both serves and suffers: he serves

his people; he suffers in this service.

Ultimately, this surprising combination finds its fulfilment in Jesus. But his suffering is not just a logical consequence of his service. In a sense, here at the cross we see that his suffering is his service. His suffering is the means by which he will bring many to God, his suffering is the means by which God himself takes the weight of our sin to the grave.

This knowledge leads us to subdued celebration as we read this text. On the one hand, we must sit in the gutter. Any death this brutal is a tragedy. We should mourn. And this death especially so, because here we cut off our source of life. Like the farmers in Oklahoma, we have treated our source of life so improperly that now we

look on as he dies.

And yet, there is room for subdued celebration. Not from our text, but from the text that it invokes – Psalm 22. Because following pain in Psalm 22 is praise. Beginning from verse 22 of that psalm is an extended meditation on the promises kept, on the provision provided, on the proclamation of God’s goodness to the nations. Jesus will follow the trajectory of the psalm. He descends into the depths, taking all our sin with him, and he reemerges by the power of God, alive, well, offering forgiveness to all.

I love how that Psalm draws to a close – well, near to the close – in verse 27:

27 All the ends of the earth shall

remember

and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.

28 For kingship belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

Remember our first point: the sneering coronation. The Roman authorities thought that kingship belonged to Caesar. And they were convinced that the cross underlined this reality. Not at all. In fact, at the cross God's promises are kept, provision is provided, and his glory proclaimed. And now all the families of nations are invited to worship him.

Three brief points of application.

1. Know the story

I think that letting the Old Testament shape your understanding of the New will always enhance your understanding of Jesus. When we take up the invitation of a text to see particular events as connecting to the vast sweep of God's story, we always end with a bigger – more true – picture of Jesus.

2. Behold the king.

This is perhaps a little trite. But spend some time today reflecting on Jesus. How different he is from other kings. To borrow from the book of Revelation, he is the Lion and the Lamb, the conquering king and the sacrifice for us. Let your mind rest on that today. Perhaps spend a dozen or so seconds fixing Jesus' work for you on the

cross in your mind and resolving to return to this thought later today.

3. Celebrate.

It seems strange to end of this note. But the cross is different from the dustbowl of Oklahoma. Firstly, it is different because the over-farming was accidental; what we see in our passage is malicious. But secondly it's different because with the dustbowl, the people must bear the consequences of their actions. In a sense, they are punished: crops fail; land is taken; people scatter West. But at the cross, Jesus bears the consequence for our actions. We should have been there, our clothing divided over, our hands feeling the nails. But he went for us. Our king. Our suffering servant. The Lion. The Lamb.