

Good Friday Stations of the City

Delivered at Harvard Square, Outside the Holyoke Center, Cambridge, MA

April 18, 2003

Station X – “They Divided His Clothing by Casting Lots”

(Mat 27:33-37 NRSV)

<sup>33</sup> And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), <sup>34</sup> they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. <sup>35</sup> And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; <sup>36</sup> then they sat down there and kept watch over him. <sup>37</sup> Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

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Why did Jesus die on the cross? Answering that question has sent countless generations of Christians scurrying after ways to simultaneously save God's reputation and save our souls. In the end they have said something like, God so loved the world that God sacrificed his son to ransom humankind from its sins. I wonder if the truth is not a lot simpler than that, not to mention, a lot less grotesque.

<sup>37</sup> Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." They meant it as a joke. He was nothing to them, nothing but another condemned man. And what a condemned man was to them was simply his possessions, which the guards gambled to divide among themselves. Matthew even uses grammar to make the point. The main verb, the main action of the sentence was dividing Jesus' clothes. The crucifixion is but a subordinate clause, a necessary but subordinate condition to obtain his ragged garments – when they crucified him, they divided his clothes among them.

Jesus' own followers are utterly the opposite in one sense. They had believed that, in fact, he was the Son of David, heir to the empire. To them he was no joke.

Ironically, though, when they used the term king, both Jesus' followers and the Roman guards meant the same thing. They both meant the kind of king that strong-arms its enemies and crushes its foes. By the end of Friday, both Jesus' followers and the guards who divided his clothes agreed that this king he was not. By the end of Friday he was worthless to both. To his followers he was a great disappointment. To the guards he was a joke and a pile of clothes. At heart his meaning was the same for both.

That would give proof enough to the idea that humankind was in need of saving. There can be little question of that. And there is little question that Jesus was and is all about saving us. But to say that this whole drama was contrived so that God's sacrifice could buy our redemption is to once again make the crucifixion a subordinate clause. It is to make the discussion of Jesus' kingship even less than a joke. And it is to fail to see the connection between the sign above his head and what God was trying to do.

It was, of course, human sinfulness that executed Jesus and that thought his garments his only real value. It was human sinfulness that saw the ability to exercise military power as a sure sign of God's endorsement. It was human sinfulness that thought that God's goodness could be so readily defeated by the powers and the principalities.

And for all the world, as those below him gambled for his clothes and those who had followed him fled and hid, it looked like the triumph of human sinfulness. A world in need of

saving was caught in a snapshot of more death than it comprehended.

Why did Jesus die on the cross? Quite clearly because of the brutality, depth and horror of human sinfulness. But even on Good Friday we must look ahead enough to realize that God's response was to demonstrate that they had taken the real power for a joke and a disappointment. The question, then, is not so much, why did Jesus die on the cross – the answer to that is perfectly obvious. The better question is, why did God respond with the resurrection? Quite simply, God meant to get the last laugh about the sign over Jesus' head; God meant show us a different blueprint for sovereignty and power; God meant to save us from death and help us to choose life. God meant to do far more than ransom us; God meant to transform us. Amen.