

*33When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." 39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

I grew up singing words that are no longer in the hymnal. In the last verse of Stand up, stand up for Jesus came these words: "From victory unto victory, his army he shall lead, til every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed." What a marvelous high to sing those words – what a wonderful future they promised.

I also grew up singing the hymn, Lead on O King Eternal. A verse in that hymn ended with these words: "For not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes."

Two very different pictures of how King Jesus wages war – one military – conquering – the other winning through deeds of love and mercy.

Is either of them true to Jesus? We know that when Jesus' disciple drew a sword Jesus rebuked him. In the book of Revelation the risen Christ appears not with a sword in his hand but with a sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth. Jesus' power was never demonstrated through force or violence but through the word he spoke.

Now that all seems to fit with the words of Lead on O King Eternal – for not with swords loud clashing nor roll of stirring drums, but deed of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes. I'd like to think that is true – that if you and I and all believers just do enough good and kind things that the whole world will be transformed and violent neighborhoods will turn into Sesame Street. But who did more kind and good things than Jesus? Did his love win over the hearts of his enemies? No.

Winning the world with kindness, or forcing evil into submission through force – those are the kinds of solutions you and I would dream up – but God has a different way. That way is lived and declared in Jesus' crucifixion.

As Luke tells of that day, the first words from Jesus' mouth were these: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Not, get even with them, give them what they deserve, hurt them as they have hurt me – but Father, forgive them.

And in response came the scoffing, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one. If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." And even one of the criminals joined in "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us."

Save yourself. Isn't that exactly what we are all trying to do with our swords and with our deeds of love and mercy – save ourselves? We are seeking some way of safety and security – a way to avoid crosses. But Jesus said crosses were part of God's way for himself. And for any who would follow him. Remember his words – if any would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it.

Jesus was living his words - trusting that his Father would save him.

The second one being crucified with him seemed to understand this when he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Somehow that second criminal was given faith to believe more than his eyes could see, more than the pain and thirst his body experienced. He was given faith to trust that death would not be the last word for Jesus.

As Jesus resurrection proved this criminal's faith was not disappointed.

Nor will your faith in Jesus be disappointed.

Once you know that - in every moment you believe that and live that - it is as if you are in Jesus' kingdom already. For you know and believe and live that your life is in his hands and under his guidance and it is. Faith in Jesus means you live in God's kingdom today.

And will live in his kingdom forever. Amen.

