

Sermon: With Me in Paradise

Scripture: Luke 23:33-43

When 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. Then Jesus said, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And 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!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today, you will be with me in Paradise.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Here is an elegant statement, unfettered by embellishment of prose or exaggeration, glistening with empathy and compassion. The statement is profoundly poignant because of its context and circumstance, and it is known to be true simply because of the reputation and identity of the man who spoke it: “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (v.43). For a dying man, a convicted and confessed thief, these words uttered by the crucified Christ must have caused sheer unadulterated ecstasy – unspeakable joy.

Jesus’ last words to another human being before his death and resurrection were words of forgiveness congruent with the ministry of his short life. Jesus had spent his life teaching about the kingdom of God, preaching liberation to the captives, and healing those who were sick, and lame, Jesus’ miracles and teachings had so confounded the status quo of elders, priests, and politicians that he was deemed a threat to their religion and their way of life.

Jesus had challenged the unjust treatment of women, preached the need for patience with children, and accused the Pharisees and Sadducees of lacking good faith. His ministry had been controversial, powerful, and world altering, to the point that those whom he threatened condemned him to death by crucifixion. This dying thief has seen something, recognized something in this moment, that others will come to understand only by being taught by the risen Christ.

Three days later a pair of bewildered disciples on the Emmaus Road will listen to Christ interpret the scriptures; “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (24:26). Later, a second time Jesus will interpret “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms” so that they may understand the divine necessity that “the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day” (24:44;46). Jesus’ disciples have the same advantage we are given in worship to hear the voice of Christ interpreting the Scriptures, but the dying thief stretched out on a cross lacks this benefit.

All he can know is the brutal gore and stench of crucifixion. His astonishing, out-of-the-blue request raises the question of how we are to recognize the presence of God’s authorized prophet.

Talk of salvation hangs thick in the air in these few verses, Jesus is taunted, “Let him save himself” (v.35), then twice dared, “save yourself” (v. 37;39), each time with the implication that by doing so he might prove himself and thereby verify the titles – Messiah, King of the Jews – Jesus remains silent. Just moments before, he had prayed for their forgiveness.

He does not ask to be saved, to be rescued, but ask only, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Perhaps his plea is meant to echo these words: “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!” (Psalm 25:7), which is to say, do not remember me according to my wickedness, but remember me according to your goodness.

Who among us is worthy of Grace? We are more like the thieves who hung next to Jesus than we are like Jesus. We do not know what happened to the thief that hung on the other side of Jesus' cross – the one who, rather than asking for mercy, spoke chiding words, challenging Jesus to show his might and power by saving himself and the criminals who surrounded him. Yet the Grace of God as revealed in the incarnate Jesus is a word of forgiveness and deep abiding love. It is hard for us to believe in the gracious God, in the forgiving God, in the God who would love us even when we disappoint and sin.

Jesus' stories of forgiveness are legendary. Jesus spend most of his ministry describing the Kingdom of God as having different rules and different expectations from the rules and laws and penalties of humanity. He said that the Kingdom of God is like the love foolishly given when a son asks his father for his inheritance, takes it, goes to a foreign land, and squanders all he has. Then, when the son comes to his senses and returns, hoping his father will forgive him, he is met with celebration, rejoicing, and jubilation because of the father's great love and ability to forgive him (Luke 15:11-23).

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a shepherd who cares so deeply for all his sheep that when one is lost, the shepherd goes in search of the lost and does not give up until the sheep is found (Luke 15:1-7).

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a rich man who gives a party and when the other rich people are too busy for the party, the rich throws open the invitation and invites the poor, the blind, and the lame to be part of his feast (Luke 14:16-23). Jesus spent more time talking about the Kingdom of God than any other topic or issue. Jesus' act of forgiveness while dying on the cross resounds with his teachings that forgiveness is given to all that repent and believe, even condemned thieves during their own executions.

This kind of forgiveness is a challenging notion for many of us. Part of our inability to believe and trust the forgiving power of God's grace and mercy is our inability to believe that other people deserve mercy. We want to judge whom God lets into heaven. Many of us are more comfortable not knowing what happened to the thief who scoffed at Jesus than knowing that an underserving thief was let into Paradise.

We would rather have had Jesus say that God loves the people we like and the people we say that we are like, and that God does not love the people we say are not like us. We would prefer if God did not love the crackheads and addicts, the adulterers, the thieves, the prostitutes, the rebellious teenagers, and the disgruntled employees. We would prefer it if Paradise were exclusively for the nice people, the clean people, the polite people, the well-behaved people, the Right people.

As Christians we have a confessional faith, not because we are weak, but because God is strong, and God is love. We have a confessional faith because the grace of God is sufficient for all. There is grace for us and for the people we do not like. We have a confessional faith because God is our refuge and our strength. We confess because God will hear and forgive our sins and their sins too. Our salvation is not dependent upon the preacher, the bishop, or each other, but on a loving, grace-giving God. We confess because God's saving grace will heal, restore, redeem, and forgive those whom God has created and whom God loves fiercely. All have sinned and fallen short; all have angered, frustrated, and disappointed God.

God so loved the entire world that whosoever, whosoever, whosoever believes shall get all the grace that God has to give. Thank God that God gives grace and that we do not.

Jesus spent his entire ministry teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God. One of Jesus' last forgiving acts on earth was to proclaim that a repentant sinner would be with him that day in heaven. Oh, praise God!

PRAYER:

May God the father, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead, continually show us loving kindness.

May God the Son, victor over sin and death, grant us a share in the joy of his resurrection.

May God the Spirit, giver of light and peace, renew our hearts in love.

May almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, continue to bless us. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Here, at the end of the Christian year, Advent starts next week, we might say of this final reading from Luke that the leaders, soldiers, and the first thief all live in ordinary time, where the powers of violence determine events and death is the last word; But the second thief lives already in the reign of Christ. If we can see this, we might also see – as thick darkness falls over this sad scene (v.44) – a far, faint light rising from the dawning of this realm, a place as calm and refreshing as the garden called Paradise.