

“Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:39-43

Seven Last Words

February 24, 2021

Bible Reading

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.”

Sermon

Throughout his life Jesus was routinely accused of being with the wrong people. Women of dubious reputation... lepers... tax collectors... Roman soldiers... he even held up a Samaritan as a hero. Throughout his life Jesus was accused of being with the wrong people and today we pause to remember that in his death it was the same. He was crucified between two wrongdoers... Luke calls them “bandits” - by which he meant these were not small-time offenders, but hardened criminals. You may have heard it said: “Jesus was crucified not on the altar between two candles but on Golgotha between two thieves.”

Now, this detail about the two thieves is so important that all four Gospel writers chose to include it in their stories of Jesus' passion. Partly this was because of the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah; "... he was numbered among the transgressors." He – the righteous one... perfection itself... was "numbered among the transgressors." Yet, it must also be that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John specifically intended that we should ponder deeply this strange, incongruous – indeed, unacceptable picture of a God who is nailed up between two bandits... to the scorn of passersby. To ponder deeply what this says about God... and to ponder what it says about us.

First, it says about God that he will go to ANY LENGTHS to bring us to himself. Who in a million years would ever dream of having such an objectionable event as crucifixion at the heart of your faith? No such image of God has ever been imagined in all the history of religion. No one has ever matched this story for sheer ugliness and perversity – the divine redeemer obscenely displayed... reviled, mocked, spat upon, beaten nearly to death, covered with dirt, and sweat and blood. Why has the Son of God come to this end?¹ He has come to this end to bring us to himself... so that we might comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge.²

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross* (Eerdmans-2005), p. 16-17.

² Ephesians 3:18-19

Yes, this awful scene of a darkened sky marked with three crosses says something about God... yet it also says something about US... because there are aspects of US in each of these bandits with the first one – the one on the left – we say, “If you are Messiah, save yourself – and while you’re at it, save us too.” Like the thief we struggle to see any semblance of God’s power in this crucifixion. Instead, we ask how the very “Son of God” could allow himself to be so weak, so vulnerable? How could the Messiah of God be associated with something so humiliating?

It’s a different matter with the second thief – the one on the Lord’s right... and we need to ponder just what made the difference? What did this second man see in Jesus’ tortured face? What sort of kingship did he glimpse in those eyes? Did he perhaps hear Jesus say, “Father, forgive them?” The story does not tell us what triggers the man’s change of heart. All we know is that he is every bit as evil as everyone else... yet, as he looks at Jesus something inside him opens. He is a hardened criminal, yes! But he’s also a human being – created in the image of God – which means created with the capacity to recognize God when he sees him... and when he looks at Jesus that day - something happens - God’s image in him recognizes God’s image in Christ. And when it does, he turns to the other thief and rebukes him for taunting the Lord... confessing his own guilt as well as Jesus’ innocence... and then he turning to Jesus he asks, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“Remember me kindly,” he seems to plead. “Try to see what is still worthy in me and remember that. Love me even though I know I don’t deserve it.”

Well, this plea from the penitent thief is just the opening Jesus needs. All Jesus needs is the tiniest opening – the smallest crack in the wall of this man’s hardened heart – and in an instant... literally in the blink of an eye, Jesus offers him everything... more than he could ever imagine... the best gift ever given... the Lord offers him his very self. Today you will be WITH ME...

It is the ONLY TIME in the Gospels that Jesus offers immediate (instantaneous) salvation... to be WITH HIM in paradise – that very day. This thief cannot climb down from the cross and prove show himself to be sincere... he cannot go and offer proof of his conversion... there’s simply no time for that. So here Jesus shows his kingly power to show mercy on one who has done nothing to deserve it... here the Lord pours out his sovereign grace upon a man who can do nothing to show his gratitude. Why? Because this is who he is – this is who Jesus is – he is the One who came to seek and to save the lost. And with this word he saves another “lost one” even as he refuses to save himself.

So, my friends, I ask you now? Can you see yourself as one for whom Jesus died? Can you say today with the second thief, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom?” because it was not only for the bandits and bad elements – it was for us, too... with our masks of innocence and our delusions about our own righteousness. His death was for us, too!