

"Paradise" Luke 23:32-43 Invocavit Midweek 2022

Our text today outlines the abuse Christ received during his final moments on the cross. Saints Matthew and Mark reveal that at least some of the people passing by mocked Christ. The elders and chief priests and scribes also took the time to hurl various taunts against Christ. Saint Luke records that they said, "He saved others. Let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." Even the two criminals reviled Him. According to Matthew and Mark, not just the one, but both mocked Christ.

Why did so many speak blasphemies against Him, even though He had just prayed on their behalf? I think that this is a common reaction among sinners. When we hear someone being compassionate toward us, we humans sometimes lash out because we do not want to think that we need compassion.

In this way, the people might well have said to Christ, "Who are You to ask for forgiveness for me? You are a miserable criminal, hung between two robbers. You are obviously cursed by God based on this awful death you are dying. I, on the other hand, do not suffer God's wrath. Obviously, I am a better person than you. So keep your prayer of forgiveness to yourself!"

These are blasphemous thoughts. Although we do not think those specifically, yet we also are sometimes hostile when someone

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offers us pity. We sometimes do not want sympathy. We also want to hold onto our feelings of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness.

Sometimes, we may take offense at God's Word of forgiveness, whether preached or taught or read. The same Word that is meant to benefit us can sometimes get stuck in our ears. In other words, we do not want to accept certain things, even though those things are spoken by Christ. May the Lord bend our knees to repentance at such times.

We know that one of the bandits crucified with Christ had a change of heart. Eventually, something got through to him. Likely, it was the gracious words of Christ asking for forgiveness from His Father for His crucifiers. The very thing that created anger in some was still the powerful Word of God. Through this Word, the Spirit worked faith and repentance in the dying man.

Notice that this man seems like the least likely one to repent! He is not one of the religious-minded church leaders. He is not even one of the common people. He is a criminal. The robber is literally called an "evil-doer". This is not just the sins that people do on a regular basis. He did wicked things. This man was a particularly bad person.

Was he baptized? Possibly. All of Judea went out to be baptized by John. Perhaps this man, desiring repentance and forgiveness,

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received baptism at the Jordan. Perhaps not. If he did, then he fell a long way during the roughly three years since his baptism.

Yet this man, the wicked evil-doer, hears and understands what the others do not. He sees, at last, the meaning of the death he is witnessing. He confesses openly before everyone that he deserves his crucifixion, but Christ does not.

He even confesses that Christ has done nothing wrong. Perhaps this reflects that he had previously heard of Christ or knew of his life. Either way, it means that he put two and two together and recognized that here was the Messiah, dying for the sins of the world. We know this because his next words. "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." The robber wants Christ to remember him in His kingdom, which means more than simply recalling him to mind. Here, to remember means to visit the man with His mercy. It means "Save me!" He does not ask Christ to save him by taking him down from the cross, the way the other robber wanted it. No, he wants Christ to save him after death, that is, to bring him into His eternal kingdom.

The man is begging for mercy from the only Man in history who could help him. At that moment, Christ was visibly demonstrating His own Name, "Jesus", by shedding His Blood for the sins of the world. For "Jesus" means "The Lord saves." There He was, saving sinners,

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being Jesus more than any other time in His life. What better time to beg for mercy than when Jesus is being Jesus?

Of course, Jesus saves at many times through His gracious Word. You did not have to be there when they crucified my Lord, as the robber was. No, Jesus brings His death to you through the Gospel. He saves you any time you hear the Gospel, or are splashed with it, or eat and drink it. Then you are with the robber, hearing the voice of Jesus being Jesus.

For He answers. "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." This is an absolution of the first degree, since here Jesus is flinging wide the gates of heaven for a repentant sinner. In Eden, the entrance had been sealed and guarded by cherubim with a flaming sword to keep out all evildoers like this robber. But Jesus speaks the Word that makes the cherubim sheathe their sword and step aside. Jesus speaks the Word that changes death to life and hell to heaven.

This is the grace of Jesus. While the robber is dying, there is no time for works, either to earn or repay Jesus. Death is moments away. Hands that might have performed good deeds are nailed helplessly to wood. Feet that might have walked the path of righteousness cannot move.

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We are not even told that the bandit spoke anymore after this, although perhaps he did. Did he sing praises to God at the mercy he received? Perhaps. Or perhaps he said nothing because he was so overwhelmed by the rich Word of forgiveness. But he does not have to speak. He does not have to earn anything. He does not have to give the right speech or say the correct prayer. He is saved simply and purely by the grace that flows from the lips of his Savior.

We hear the same absolution from the same Savior. To be sure, He does not say the word, "Today." But He truly opens the doors to Paradise for us every time He says, "Your sins are forgiven."

Should you die today, you would also today be in the presence of Christ. Like the repentant bandit, your body would remain below until the resurrection. Then the full consummation of Christ's absolution would take hold, as you and all the saints are raised to eternal blessedness in the kingdom of Jesus Christ our dear Lord.

May His Spirit keep us in this repentance and kingdom until that sweet day. Amen.