

**“Jesus Promises”**

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Judgment had been passed. The sentence had been handed down. Jesus had been crucified and now he hangs naked on a cross between two other condemned men, a sure sign that he must certainly be guilty of something. Below, the Jewish leaders who had worked so hard to squelch the threat Jesus posed to their power now stand in scorn, scoffing at the suffering man before them. Mocking the miracles of mercy for which Jesus was known, the rulers use these compassionate acts as ammunition for their taunts: “He saved others;” they jeer, “let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God” (Luke 23:35). Always ready to display the power that defined them, the Roman soldiers supervising his execution quickly pile on and parrot the insults of the Jews by playing on the inscription above his bloody head, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself” they said.

And not to be left out, the cruelty continues in the voice of one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus. In the reading we just heard, Luke writes, “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him...” (Luke 23:39). “Railed” is a vivid verb with violent connotations, and, as we consider its use in our text, it’s helpful to hear this verb in its original form. The word in Greek is “blasphēmeō.” This is the verb Luke used to describe the shocking attack from the heckler hanging next to Jesus, and it doesn’t take much imagination to hear echoes of the English word “blasphemy” in this Greek term. When you examine the way this Greek word is used in the Bible it can mean to vilify, to defame, to revile, or to speak evil of someone.

In the Eighth Commandment God says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” And, in Luther’s explanation of this commandment, he writes, “We should fear and love God that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.”

Doomed to spend his dying moments between two criminals, Jesus now finds himself among strange neighbors. And the conversation that ensues is a study in the Eighth Commandment. As the one neighbor rails at Jesus, spewing blasphemy at the Son of God, the other neighbor enters the fray, yet instead of joining in the chorus of cruelty, this condemned and dying criminal puts the best construction on everything.

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:40-41). Not only does the second criminal defend and speak well of the dying Jesus, but with his own last words, this condemned criminal confesses a saving faith and follows it with one of the most moving prayers in all of Scripture: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

Throughout the season of Lent, we have paired our reflections on Christ’s passion with images that bring us into the story, and tonight, as we consider this strange exchange at Golgotha, we see an image of this station of the cross – a painting by Titian known as, “Christ and the Good Thief.” While we all know the scene depicted in this masterpiece, the title employs an oxymoron that can easily lead us down the wrong path.

You see, there is no “good” thief. In fact, there is no good person. In the verse that precedes today’s reading from Isaiah, the prophet writes, “We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). And, drawing on the language of the Psalms, Paul writes, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:19-12).



There is no good thief. There is no good person. We are always inclined to put ourselves at the center of our story – to make ourselves the subject, if not the hero, of our own self-centered drama. But we cannot save ourselves, and as misleading as the title of this painting may be, I think the artist understood this truth because, in this painting, the thief seems to blend into the bleak background, while the image of the dying Christ glows with a light that leaves no doubt about the central character in the painting.

And this is so very important, because once you understand who is at the center of the story, the desperate words from the dying thief bear even more weight: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus answers this humble cry for mercy with a promise that changes everything. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

At this station of the cross, Jesus makes a promise, and while our reading ends with Jesus speaking words of paradise, this promise gives life to a dying man. Titian displays the impact of this promise as the thief raises his head in hope and looks to the way of salvation in the words of his dying Savior.

And tonight, my friends, this story matters to us, because tonight, you and I approach our Savior with the same problem as the thief on the cross. Tonight, we lay bare before the Son of God, the truth of who we really are with words of repentance and faith. And tonight, as we move toward the table of our Lord, we cry out with the broken and penitent thief, “Jesus, remember me.” And, tonight, you can be absolutely certain that He does. You see, Jesus died for sins of the world – for every thief and every murderer, every adulterer and every blasphemer, for the lust and greed that governs our lives and for the lies and hate that leave our lips. The Son of God was “numbered with the transgressors; yet bore the sins of many, and (tonight, He) makes intercession for” you.

Jesus hangs on the Cross between two criminals. One of the condemned joins in the mockery. The other criminal admits his sin, confesses his faith, and asks Jesus to remember him. And in response to this plea for mercy, Jesus promises paradise. Tonight, he does the same thing for you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say: “Amen.”

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