

The Two Criminals

Luke 23: 39-43

How different were the reactions of the two criminals crucified with Jesus. Not just on either side of Jesus, they were poles apart.

One was full of anger and bitterness, cynical and mocking. He had no faith except in himself – and one can almost hear him justifying his crimes and his life; blaming his parents and his upbringing, blaming poor pay and roman tyranny, blaming everyone but himself. Even in agony and at the point of death, he was still the centre of his own universe – there were no second thoughts, there was no remorse, let alone repentance. He could only shout curses and insults, refusing to recognize the trail of sin, the choices he had made, that had brought him to Golgotha.

The other man was just as bad. They obviously knew one another; maybe they had been partners in crime. Yet this second man recognized both his sin and his need. He expected nothing. He had been condemned by the court and he knew that he was guilty as charged. The time for pretending innocence was long past. Yet, when all pretence and hope had been taken away, he confessed his wrong doing. He did not try to hide the truth from Jesus, nor did he try to justify his crimes – he had the courage to face the truth about himself and his life.

At that moment he recognized in Jesus a sinless, innocent victim – the only one of the three who did not deserve to be there. He did not have the theological expertise of the Pharisees; he was in too much agony to think through what few scriptures he might have remembered from childhood. He had no hope for himself, yet he recognized in the battered and bleeding figure next to him – Jesus – the Messiah, the chosen one of God – for no-one else would come to reign as king, yet that is what he confessed along with his sins.

His plea to Jesus was not for forgiveness, nor for a share in the kingdom to come, but simply that Jesus might remember him when he came in kingly power to reign – for this criminal knew that he was destined for Sheol – the place of nothingness, where no-one is remembered.

In this small request was a great statement of faith, of recognition of Jesus as Lord. This man faced the mess he had made of his life – and probably the lives of others too – he admitted his responsibility for it all and stammered out a confession of faith beyond even the disciples at that point. And Jesus, with all the agony he was suffering, answered him, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

God’s mercy is breathtaking – even at the last moment, confession and faith brought this criminal within God’s wide arms of love. This is the amazing grace and mercy that saved a sinner then and saves us today and promises us paradise.

Prayer

Lord, in the light of your truth, help us to see those things that displease you. Give us the courage to admit our responsibility for them and for the choices that we have made. And by your grace, grant us mercy.

As we confess our faith that Jesus is Lord, may we truly believe it in our hearts and may we live our lives in the knowledge that we too will share one day in your heavenly kingdom. Amen

John 19:25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Meditation of Mary, the mother of Jesus

We'd enjoyed years of happiness together in Nazareth, just another family quietly going about our business. I did worry of course, mothers always do, don't they? But it was only after he began preaching and teaching, healing the sick, restoring the broken, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, that my fears surfaced.

Many followed him, loving Jesus just as I did, but inevitably he ruffled feathers, plenty not liking what they heard. He challenged so much they held dear, not just questioning the status quo but threatening to sweep it away all together.

No surprise, then, that the scribes and the Pharisees resolved to silence him, and eventually seized their chance.

I watched bereft as they nailed him to that cross, blood seeping from his head, his hands and his feet. As he hung there, convulsed by the pain, I shared his agony, my heart broken as only a mother's can be.

I wanted to reach out to hold, protect and comfort. And when he finally spoke, entrusting me into the care of his most trusted friend, I realised he wanted to do precisely the same for me.

I held a special place in his heart, understandably, but I'm not the only one. You do, too, every one of you.

In the awfulness of his suffering, his concern was still to love – to bring healing through his brokenness, life through his death.

I'd done my best for him; now he was doing his best, not just for me, but for all and, today, as best we can, we stand by that cross again.

This reflection is based on Matthew 27.33-56

The Dread of the Cross

Calvary was a dreadful place on that day. The word comes from the Latin 'Calva' and is the translation of the Aramaic 'Golgotha' – 'the place of the skull' – it lived up to its ghastly name when it became a place of torture and death on the first Good Friday. Judicial executions that still exist today are carried out in clinical privacy, but the Roman way was to do it as shamefully and as painfully as possible. Part of the torture of crucifixion was an inability to breathe and suffocation was inevitable as the end drew near. Perhaps we might reflect that Jesus has been where sadly sufferers of Covid 19 struggle for breath. He knows their suffering. Yet this place was not always a dark place, for John tells us that a garden was there. John.19.14.

It is the sin of the human heart that robbed the garden of its beauty on that day, much like the sinful rebellion of our human forebears robbed Eden of its tranquil perfection.

Matthew's crucifixion account reveals the extent of the torture and the mocking and the abuse that Jesus suffered on the cross.

The wine mixed with gall was a cruel attempt to invite a thirsty Jesus to drink, only for it to be snatched away by its poisonous taste. The one who offered the refreshment of living water died with an unquenched thirst.

Jesus was crucified between two criminals; he shared their fate. The word robbers is a weak translation of the noun. They were more than thieves. They were insurrectionists, rebel guerrillas – men who had determined that by their own violence and cruelty they would seek freedom for Israel. The path of Jesus was diametrically opposed to theirs. He was the rightful king of Israel, but his message was never of violent insurrection. Rome's soldiers who came to him for help were offered mercy and blessing.

Passers-by hurled their own cruel insults at him. But, however unwittingly, they spoke the words of a far more sinister accuser: *'If you are the Son of God'*. Jesus had heard that challenge before in the wilderness, now it haunts him again. Not unlike Job, many centuries before. As a man of innocent goodness he too had born the wrath and vindictive accusations of Satan.

These dark insinuations were compounded by the accusations of the elders of Israel. Their raw and implacable hatred now given full vent as mocking taunts of Jesus, who has laid aside his royal dominion and power for such as them.

Then came the darkest most painful moment of all. Quite literally the bright lit sky turns into darkness and sin is cursed in Jesus by the wrath of God poured out upon him. Several centuries earlier Amos had prophesied:

*In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord,
"I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight.*

*I will turn your religious festivals into mourning
and all your singing into weeping.*

*I will make all of you wear sackcloth
and shave your heads.*

*I will make that time like mourning for an only son
and the end of it like a bitter day.*

Amos.8.9-10

Jesus prayer of abandonment and his cry of dereliction were signs of a hideous agony that no human being before or ever since has known. The darkest place to which any human soul has ever travelled. This was the abyss of his alienation from the Father, the loss of his loving presence.

And Elijah didn't come to save him . . .nobody did . . . he was abandoned!

The Impact of the Cross.

Why should the remembrance of such a hideous day be called, 'Good Friday?' The following points in this reflection will make that perfectly plain.

It is Good Friday because Jesus did not '*save himself*' but by the cross and his humiliation saved those who trust in his name. To have come down from the cross as his enemies taunted would have been to have ended the mercy of God for the human race. Jesus could have saved himself with the power of legion upon legion of angels, but he could not have saved himself if he was to save others.

Jesus remained on the cross for you and me!

As the apostle Peter said on another occasion

"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The alienation of Jesus from the Father as he hung on the cross and the dramatic signs which attended that dereliction are testimony to the wrath of God poured out upon God's very own Son in a divine conspiracy of love. A love which we will never be able to fully comprehend. (Ephesians 3.17-19) This is how Paul describes this love.

"so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

In the cry of dereliction, the horror of the world's sin – let us say it as it is – the horror of your sin and my sin, the cost of our salvation, is made plain.

But there is yet more. At the moment of that piercing cry two things occurred which only the cross of Jesus could secure.

The rending of the temple veil was the first. This was a thick blue and purple veil that kept all but the high priest out of the most sacred place of Israelite religion. It kept all at a distance from the presence of the Living God – until this

moment. This moment when Christ yielded up his Spirit and access into the Father's presence is offered to all who draw nigh in Jesus. Or to put it another way, God sends his abiding presence into our hearts by His Spirit. Because of the cross God is with us, Jesus never leaves us.

The second occurrence was a shattering earthquake that opened tombs (as earthquakes still do to this day in some areas of our world!) But this time it was different, for it heralded an unbelievable event just days away.

The Effect of the Cross.

Matthew is unable to tell the story of the crucifixion without giving us something of a spoiler. He can't wait to get to the hope which the crucifixion has secured and made certain. I think he includes this in his crucifixion narrative because it would be completely overlooked in the light of the glorious resurrection of Jesus on Easter day, if he had left it till then to record the event. This is something that we don't often hear mentioned on Easter Sunday, because the resurrection of Jesus is so glorious and triumphant in itself, blazing like the sun, it makes these smaller signs seem almost insignificant by comparison but Matthew is certain about them.

"Many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many."

By the favour and mercy of God and as a sign to some in Jerusalem, these godly men and women of the Old Covenant were raised on the same day of Jesus resurrection. (Or perhaps shortly afterwards)

These verses point to God's promise to all who believe – made holy by Christ's death - of a resurrection to new life for all who have faith in Jesus and who trust in the cross of Christ as their *only hope* of salvation. That is why today is Good Friday. And, yes, though we mourn today our foul sin, and the costly price Jesus paid to redeem us, we also rejoice, *even today*, in the hope of resurrection, for Matthew will not let us forget it.