

Rays of Glory Made Manifest In The Penitent Thief.

Text: Luke 23:39-43

1) In the dying thief's faith

Suggested Hymns:

2) In the Lord's promise to him

149, 36, 68, 51, 84

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 23:39-43, ³⁹ *Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."*

⁴⁰ *But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"* ⁴¹ *"And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴² *Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."* ⁴³ *And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our text relates one of the most pleasing incidents in the sombre history of our Lord's holy Passion. It is the conversation between Jesus and one of the two robbers crucified with Him.

In our last sermon we heard the message which Pilate's wife had sent to her husband requesting him to set Jesus free. Perhaps she knew the weakness of his character. Pilate was not a man suited for the position of a judge. A judge must render his decision in strict conformity with the stern facts before him and neither give way to sentiment nor be intimidated by threats.

Now Pilate was a man who lacked fearlessness as a judge. He declared that he could find no fault in Jesus. He declared that Jesus was perfectly innocent of the charges laid against Him. But when the infuriated Jewish mob insisted that Jesus must be crucified and cried out, saying, *"If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar,"*¹

Pilate became frightened. He feared that the Jews might report him to Caesar and get him into trouble.

And so, finally, he gave the sentence that it should be as they required, but at the same time, took water and washed his hands before the multitude, which was a symbolical act by which he intended to declare his innocence in the matter, and said, ***“I am innocent of the blood of this just Person.”***²

This was an echo of the words of his wife, ***“Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.”***³ After this all the people answered, ***“His blood be on us and on our children.”***⁴

Jesus was now placed into the charge of the Roman guard that attended to the execution of criminals. Jesus was mocked and abused by the soldiers and taken to Calvary, the place of execution.

Two robbers are crucified with Him, and to create the impression that Jesus is the greatest culprit of the three, He is crucified in the middle. Even the position assigned to Jesus in the execution must add to His humiliation.

But even while hanging on the shameful tree between the two robbers His divine glory brilliantly breaks forth as He changes the vile heart of one of those fellow-sufferers and gives him the promise of paradise. Let us therefore consider the rays of divine glory of the suffering and dying Saviour made manifest in the penitent thief. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Rays Of Divine Glory In The Dying Thief’s Faith.

We are informed by Matthew and Mark that in the beginning both criminals reviled Jesus. We read in Mark 15:32 that ***Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.*** And in Matthew 27:44, ***“Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him.***

Our text then continues saying, ³⁹ ***Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.”***

But by and by the mouth of one of them is hushed. He has no more to say against the Lord who is as silent as a lamb taken to the slaughter. And when his companion on the other side of Jesus again pours forth a volley of blasphemies

against the Man of Sorrows hanging in their midst, he speaks. But O what a change in the man's tone and language!

⁴⁰ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?" ⁴¹ "And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." This sudden change of sentiment must have been startling in the ears of his companion. How is it to be accounted for?

Hardened criminals never admit their own guilt, and much less do they delight in the innocence of others, but rather feel delighted to find that others are no better than they are themselves. But now this man confesses that he is receiving the due reward of his deeds, and praises the innocence of Jesus whom only a short while ago he had reviled. How is that to be accounted for?

Was it the meekness of Jesus who uttered not a single word of condemnation or complaint against His tormentors? Was it His prayer for His enemies *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"*⁵ which made a profound impression on the man's soul so that he could not constrain himself from admitting his own guilt and feeling ashamed of his black deeds while an innocent man was hanging at his side?

That solution would perhaps be satisfactory and explain everything if the man had said nothing more. However, he did not only address his companion who, most likely, was his associate in his past life of crime, he also spoke to Jesus. We read in our text, *⁴² Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."*

The more one contemplates this criminal's prayer, the more one is moved by it. Jesus is dying on the cross, He is in a worse condition than either of the criminals. Jesus is hounded to His death by all those around His cross, and yet this robber sees in Jesus the One who will come in connection with His kingdom.

When You come into Your kingdom means at the end of the world. This man does not only see the divine Messianic King in this dying Jesus, but he also sees Him *"in connection with"* His Messianic kingdom in the day when that kingdom is to be consummated fully.

We now see what lies in the humble petition “*remember me.*” It is the opposite of being forgotten, which means excluded from that kingdom. “*Remember me,*” O heavenly King, include me, do not bar me out because of my sins and crimes!

But why does he speak of that final day of the world and not of the fast-approaching hour of his death? Either one includes the other. We think too much only of the latter and too little of the former.

The old conception of the Messiah placed Christ in connection with His glory-kingdom. In the case of the criminal the fact deserves attention that he did not think of a political, earthly kingdom as the Jews did, who debased and falsified the glory-kingdom.

Luther's Small Catechism explains this clearly. Under the heading of “The Lord’s Prayer,” “The Second Petition” we learn about three kingdoms. The kingdom of God in His ruling as king over the whole universe is called the *Kingdom of Power*. The kingdom of God in His ruling the church on earth is called the *Kingdom of Grace*. The kingdom of God in His ruling the church and angels in heaven is called the kingdom of glory.

When we pray “Thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer we mean God’s *Kingdom of Grace* and His *Kingdom of Glory*, but not His Kingdom of power.

In the explanation we read, God’s kingdom of power cannot come to us, because all things are already in this kingdom by nature. The kingdom of grace comes to the heathen without their prayer, as it also came to us in Baptism without our prayer. But unless it continues to come to us, we shall lose it, hence we pray that it may continue with us. Likewise the kingdom of glory will come without our prayer, but we ask that it may come to us also that we may enter therein.

It is only by the grace of God that the thief on the cross looked forward to the Kingdom of Glory and asked to be remembered by Jesus.

Jesus who was indeed entering death, was not “saving himself” as his mockers cried. They thought that His dying would prove that He was not the Messiah. But the faith of this robber had risen above these vain Jewish dreams.

Furthermore, this criminal speaks of the great coming at the last day also because it is resurrection day. Why would there be a glorious coming at all, why should the almighty God stand at the last day upon the earth, unless, as Job says in 19:25-27, *“yet in my flesh shall I see God,” with “mine eyes.?”* All this points to the fact that this robber was a Jew.

No more striking proof could this man have given of a true genuine faith in Jesus. Just think of it. So great is the power of Jesus that even now, while hanging on the cross, He performs a divine miracle upon the soul of a man at His side, upon the soul of a culprit whose life has been a continual chain of misdeeds, of a culprit who is facing the grim monster of death.

Jesus changes that vile heart and fills it with love for the Saviour whom it had been hating with all the intensity of a hardened sinner. He makes words of praise and of longing for heaven issue from those lips that shortly before had been speaking the vilest blasphemies.

The conversion of a sinner is always a divine miracle, and a miracle greater than the raising of the dead. But how great must have been the power which induced the thief to say, *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”*

He recognised in the dying Christ the Lord, the almighty God. He believed that Jesus has a kingdom into which He shall come, even though death is now staring Jesus in the face. He asked to be remembered in that kingdom, and to be received with favour and not rejected because of his transgressions.

Remember me - faith has always found that prayer enough. Who can conceive the wonders and the greatness of that power which the dying Lord manifests in the penitent thief?

2. Rays Of Divine Glory In The Lord’s Promise To Him.

Christ exhibited His divine glory also by the promise which He gave to this man. *Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”* How sweet must these words have sounded in the dying thief’s ear! What balm and comfort must they have brought to his longing soul! The Lord

replies to the sufferer at His side with those solemn words with which so often He had begun His sacred sayings, *Assuredly, I say to you.*

Other translations express this phrase as “*Verily I say to you*” or “*Truly I say to you.*” The Greek expresses it with even more certainty, “*Amen, I say to you.*” We learn in *Luther’s Small Catechism, What does “Amen” mean?* “Amen” means, “Yes, it shall be so”.

It was as much as confirming to him by a sacred oath the promise which Jesus was about to make. And what is the promise? *Today you will be with Me in Paradise.* *Today*, that is, before the sun sinks beyond the hills, in a few hours, your pains shall be ended, your sufferings shall be ended, your soul shall leave its earthly tent and be free and be with me; for I shall die also, and where My spirit is there yours shall be also.

And how surprised will you be! You shall be with me in paradise. Before night falls upon the city of Jerusalem, the gates of another city, namely the heavenly Jerusalem, shall be lifted up, and you shall enter the glorious habitation of the blessed, the paradise of heaven, where I am always, even in death.

What does this promise to the dying thief reveal to us? It reveals many important truths. It reveals the truth that even the greatest sinners may be received into heaven when they repent of their sins and believe in Christ! It reveals the truth that even on his death-bed a sinner may come to true repentance and find favour with the Lord. It reveals the truth that the soul does not remain in a sort of a trance until the day of judgment, but that immediately, upon the death of a Christian, his soul is received into the paradise of heaven.

The book of Revelation says, *‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ “Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”*⁶ But this promise given to the dying thief reveals, above all things, the divine glory of the dying Christ.

Jesus is crossing the dark valley of death now, and He knows it. He is suffering for the sins of the whole world, also for the sins of the robbers crucified at His side, and He is aware of the fact that there will be no end of His suffering until the soul leaves the body and the night of death is upon Him.

Yet Jesus plainly sees across the river of death the beautiful shore of life, the paradise of heaven, and even now He has the power to open the gates of paradise, and to admit into it, the souls of those that die trusting in Him.

Copernicus, the great astronomer, was a faithful believer in Jesus, and before he died, he ordered that an epitaph should be engraved on his tombstone saying that he desired neither the grace awarded to Paul nor to Peter, but only that grace which the robber received. And what greater grace can any Christian desire than to be received into paradise!

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,⁷

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved to sin no more. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 19:12

² Matthew 27:24

³ Matthew 27:19

⁴ Matthew 27:25

⁵ Luke 23:34

⁶ Revelation 14:13

⁷ Hymn 68