

Second Word From The Cross.

Text: Luke 23:42-43

1) The Dying Thief's Penitent Prayer

Suggested Hymns:

2) The Lord's Gracious Answer

82 pt. 2, 337, 621, 132, 542

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 the Second Word from the Cross, Luke 23:42-43, 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,

Three crosses were erected on Calvary's mountain. Of the three, the one in the centre, perhaps a little higher than the other two, challenges our first and foremost attention.

Looking at Jesus who hangs suspended on it, it is in some respects a most uninviting and pathetic scene. His face, marred and swollen, bears the marks of cruel beatings; from His temples are dripping large, dark drops of blood, caused by the crown of thorns driven into His brow; from pierced hands and feet oozes forth a constant flow of crimson, while His entire frame convulses in agonising pain.

On either side of this Sufferer, as if fit associates, are suspended two criminals, outcasts of society, malefactors, robbers, thieves. Not only that; we are told that they also joined in the taunting and reproaches, the outbursts of mockery and derisive language that was hurled by the rulers and the rabble at that Man upon the central cross, which could be easily done, since in all probability the crosses stood in the curve of a circle, the thieves facing Christ, so that He could see them.

Thus the weary hours drag on, one, two, three. When meeting no response, except a prayer of intercession, the devilish spite and blasphemy spends itself, and a lull takes place on the tumultuous hill.

Then suddenly the stillness is broken. A voice is heard, its accents are clear and pronounced, and there is a ring of affection about it. Where did come from? It came from the malefactor crucified at Christ's right side. And what did he say? That is the topic that shall further engage our moments of Lenten meditation. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Dying Thief's Penitent Prayer

Turning his imploring gaze toward his fellow-sufferer, the thief, who occupied, as it is generally accepted, the cross to the right of Jesus and whose name according to tradition was Dysmas, utters the words of our text: ***“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”***

What a confession at such a time and from the lips of such a one! Let us analyse it a little more closely.

In the first place, it expresses faith in the divinity, the Godship, of our Saviour. ***“Lord,”*** he says. What a form of address, to one who in all outward respects was in the same misery and distress! ***“Lord.”***

And then he said: ***“Remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”*** He believes, then, that this Man is a king. But what kind of kingdom could that be which he thinks belongs to Jesus?

Certainly not an earthly kingdom; for if ever our Lord appeared far from a worldly throne, from royal dignity, it was when hanging that day expiring upon the cross.

Plainly it was a kingdom in the spiritual world of which this penitent thought. And who could be king in that spiritual world but one who in some sense, however vague it may have been to the poor man at the time, is of a divine character, God?

But what did he know, and how did he come to know, of that kingdom?

Many guesses have been made. He may have come from a pious home. He may have been raised at the knee of devout, God-fearing parents, but later led astray by evil companions.

Or he may have heard Jesus speaking in the streets of Jerusalem. He may have witnessed His works of love and divine power done there. Walking at

Jesus' side along the Way of Sorrows, he surely heard His words to the daughters of Jerusalem.

He had certainly observed the meek demeanour, the silent endurance, and the calm dignity of the Man under His sufferings. He had heard His intercessory prayer, but also the taunts and jibes of the angry rulers and mob in respect to His Messiahship, and so, from thoughtless uniting in the common mockery he falls into thoughtful reflection.

And the more he reflects, the more the grandeur of the Man at his side grows, till, unable to restrain himself any longer, his lips break open in a sublime testimony to the innocence and dignity of his Fellow-sufferer.

With a wonderful insight he grasps what had escaped Pontius Pilate, that this Man, over whom was suspended the inscription "*King of the Jews,*" was a king indeed, although His hands held no earthly sceptre and His head wore no crown but that of thorns; a spiritual kingdom in which he expects Christ to come after the pangs of crucifixion would be over.

So spoke the voice. It must have fallen like the sweetest music upon our Saviour's ears. It was the darkest hour of His work. If ever any one had believed in Him before, no one scarcely seemed to do so now.

With the exception of a few weeping women and one man, all His followers had forsaken Him and fled, and their faith, although not gone, was greatly eclipsed.

It was at such a time that this thief gives expression to his belief. Jesus had once said that, if His disciples would hold their peace, the very stones would immediately cry out.¹ Here was the stony heart of this malefactor crying out in earnest faith: "*Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*"

Nor are these words merely a testimony to our Lord's kingship and divinity; they also express the faith of the dying thief in a life hereafter. "*Remember me,*" he says.

Those words, spoken at such a time, death being only a question of hours, certainly imply that he believed that after death he would still continue to exist, that this would not be the end of him; how else could he expect to be

“remembered”? Nor only this. That cry of his connects that future life with Christ.

Those words *“Lord, remember me,”* at this time, certainly convey the conviction that, if Christ will only think of him, he will be safe. Alone he was afraid to enter that Great Beyond. But Jesus would enter that realm with him, and he felt that, if only at this moment, he could grasp the mighty hand of this Companion, death would have no power over him, and so he cried, *“Lord, remember me.”*

And once more, this petition of this man expresses his contrition. We speak of him as the penitent thief. His petition has the two requirements of repentance, true sorrow and true faith.

He confessed his guilt. With deep regret he looks back over the awful panorama of the past and admits that he is deserving of the punishment being meted out to him. In sharp tones he rebukes his companion in crime: *“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.”²*

In other words, *“Do you not even fear God, now that we are about to pass into the Great Beyond to stand before the judgement-bar of a holy and just God?”*

That petition of his implied a plea for divine forgiveness. *“Lord, remember me,”* meant as much as, *“Lord, remember me in mercy; whatever I have been and whatever I have done, forgive me; and certainly if You have been willing to bestow pardon upon Your cruel murderers, You will not reject a poor penitent like me.”*

2. The Lord's Gracious Answer

And how did our Lord receive the petition? Jesus had paid no attention, as worthy of response, to the railing of the multitude, to the speech and mockery of those who surged around His cross. This was a different sound. When had Jesus ever turned away a prayer for help? And so, turning His bleeding head, He glances over to the malefactor and in tender, gracious response says to the suppliant: *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”* What a response!

Taking up our study of these words, we shall find that they shed light upon the very things that we touched upon in the prayer of the penitent thief.

First, it sheds light upon our Lord's divinity. If there is one time when a man reveals himself in his inmost reality, when, no matter what disguise he has been wearing, he strips off the mask and speaks the truth, it is when the cold, pitiless eyes of death are fastened upon him.

To pass into eternity with a lie upon the lips is something from which the most depraved may shrink. Now, here was a man addressing a fellow-sufferer as a divine person, asking of Him a divine favour. What did that Man on the central cross answer?

Did He say: "*My dear fellow, you are mistaken; you take Me to be somebody who I am not; you look to Me for something that only God can bestow. Don't do that. Look to the One higher than I am for forgiveness and deliverance?*" Did our Lord speak like that?

On the contrary, sealing it with an oath, namely, ***Assuredly or Verily*** Jesus introduced truths that came from His innermost soul, He says: "***Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.***"

Think of what He says. He claims a place in the unseen land not only for Himself, but with perfect confidence He portions out a place even to a contrite sinner addressing Him.

Truly, this second word of the cross, like the first, uttered for the forgiveness of His enemies, like, in fact, all the words that came from His lips, indicate that Jesus is divine. None other than God Himself could have spoken such words.

Furthermore, what a flood of light that brief response sheds upon the Great Beyond! One thing is sure, — we have Christ's divine "***Assuredly***" for that, — death is not annihilation, extinction, destruction, a ceasing to be.

There is a life after this life. The soul never dies. Yes, more this sentence reveals to us: the soul exists either "***in paradise***" or, plainly implied, in a place which is its opposite. And souls are either "***with Me,***" that is, with Christ, or they are not with Christ.

And so our Lord seals with His dying breath the teaching of God's Word that there is a place for those who believe in Him and a place for those who do not.

In a word, Jesus asserts that there is a heaven and that there is a hell. When this life is spent, men pass over either into the one or into the other.

Secondly, that answer of Christ teaches that this passing over into the one or the other state and place, occurs immediately upon the termination of this present life. “**Today**,” He says, Good Friday, before the shades of night shall fall upon you, “**you**,” that is, you, in the noblest part of you, your soul, shall have been transferred to yonder realms of bliss.

If Christ’s words say anything, they say this, that the souls of believers when separated from their bodies immediately, without passing through any intermediate state, go directly to glory.

You know that a certain Church teaches that there is a place called purgatory, where men’s souls must linger for a period to be cleansed, from which the prayers and sacrifices in Mass on the part of a priest is necessary to save them. These words of Jesus give the death-blow to such a doctrine.

If ever a soul needed a purging and cleansing, it was this poor thief, snatched from the very brink of the abyss. Yet Jesus says to him: “**today you will be with Me in Paradise**,” not in purgatory.

Nor, according to a modern revived invention, do the souls go to an imagined abode where they stay in suspense, in unconscious and peaceful sleep, until the day of general resurrection.

Paradise, here and elsewhere, means the place of a conscious, happy existence for the souls of departed believers, who are there with Christ in what we call heaven, where, after reunion with their body on resurrection day, they shall dwell forever.

Once again, Christ’s words are an answer to the thief’s faith in Him as the Saviour of sinners. The whole life and all the teaching and the whole ministry of Jesus Christ, What was it, but an invitation and proclamation to sinners?

That was His mission — to seek and to save that which was lost. What could be more becoming than from the cross that Jesus should declare, not in words only, but by example, the reason why He was suspended there was “**that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life?**”³

And here was a typical case: a man who was manifestly a sinner, black with guilt, as he himself admitted. But his heart was filled with sincere sorrow for his sins, and he believed that Jesus Christ could save him. And he was not mistaken. Jesus did save him.

The first-fruit of His salvation, of His suffering and death on the cross, was that malefactor. If there is one soul of which we know positively from God's own lips who is in heaven, it is that of the thief crucified to the right of Christ. That is the precious comfort wrapped up in these words.

Since this man was saved, nobody needs to despair. Let even the worst of sinners come to Jesus in true repentance, confessing his sins with shame and sorrow of heart, and he will be saved.

But let us not extract poison out of this soul-refreshing incident on the cross. There are those who say: "*The dying thief waited until the eleventh hour and was saved, why shouldn't I?*" What stupendous folly! For who knows when his eleventh hour will be?

And it makes all the difference in the world, as far apart as the east is from the west, to come to repentance in the last moment and to put off repentance to the last moment. Those who presume to do the latter are courting the fate of the thief on the other side of our Lord, who passed into the blackest night of eternal death. And what a shame to give to sin and the world and the devil the first-fruits and the harvest of life, but only the gleanings of it to God!

On the tombstone of the great and learned scientist, but devout Christian, the renowned astronomer Copernicus, there is engraved in Latin this inscription, composed by himself: "*Not the grace of a Paul do I ask for; nor for the pardon once shown to Peter; only the forgiveness bestowed upon the thief on the cross do I petition.*" A beautiful epitaph!

When the scenes of this earth fade upon our mortal vision, may our eyes be fixed upon Christ as our only Hope and Comfort as our lips whisper the heartfelt petition: "***Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.***" The same cheering, precious response shall greet you: "***Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.***" Amen

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

¹ Luke 19:40

² Luke 23:40-41

³ John 3:16