

**Trinity Baptist Church**  
**Good Friday Service of Remembrance 02.04.21**  
**Luke 23:26-46; Today You Will Be With Me In Paradise**

**[Read Luke 23:26-31]**

26As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. 28Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29For the time will come when you will say, "Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!" 30Then

*"they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!'*

*and to the hills, 'Cover us!'*

*31For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?'*

**[Read Luke 23:32-38]**

32Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. 34Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.'

36The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.'

38There was a written notice above him, which read: *THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

**[Read Luke 23:39-46]**

39One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

40But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? 41We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

42Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

43Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

44It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last.

**[Pray]**

If I say the word Marmite, to you, what is your reaction? You either love it or hate it, apparently, so it has become a symbol of extreme reactions one way or the other. But, throughout history, Jesus Christ has provoked even more extreme reactions. Nowhere is this more evident than at his crucifixion. The women wailed and mourned as he was on his way to Golgotha, though we don't know if that was heartfelt, or mere professional mourning – the expected cultural accompaniment to impending death. The chief priests and teachers of the Law jeered maliciously at him, asking him, as Satan had before, to prove his claims to be the Messiah, by what they deemed impossible: coming down from the cross. In fact, Jesus had that power, but *chose* not to save himself for our sake. Other Gospels show the watching crowd joining in with those jeers. The Roman soldiers also taunted him, but may have seen it as just a bit of sport to taunt a so-called king of a subordinate nation – a celebration of the might of Rome. Meanwhile, the first criminal projected onto Jesus his anger at his punishment, as though somehow it was *Jesus'* fault!

We still see similar reactions to Jesus today. Some, at this time of year especially, may feel sympathy for Jesus and think it a sad indictment on humanity that he was crucified, but that is as far as it goes – they never really address his claims to be

God or respond to them. Others, with or without knowledge, rail against Jesus or jeer maliciously at his followers. Still others enjoy a good laugh at Jesus' or his followers' expense. And still others pay no attention to Jesus for most of their lives until something goes wrong for them, when they turn and blame him for their misfortune, even if it is self-inflicted.

But there is another group of people, who are more like the second criminal. *His* reaction to Jesus is very interesting and surprisingly insightful, and it elicits from Jesus an incredibly significant response, so it warrants more of our time. So, how did this criminal react?

Firstly, he acknowledged the justness of his own punishment. Luke merely calls these men criminals, but given the severity of their punishment, it is likely that they were two of those whom Mark describes as "rebels who had committed murder in the uprising." We don't know any more about this uprising, but if it was an attempt by Jewish Zealots to challenge Roman rule, that may explain why the first criminal considered his punishment unjust, despite committing murder. But the *second* criminal came to own his sin and its consequences: "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."

Secondly, he recognised that beyond the *Roman* authorities there was a far more significant judgement to face imminently – God's judgement. Since this would determine his eternal future, he rightly feared God – in the best sense of the word. He knew that, on his own, he stood helpless and guilty before God.

Thirdly, he perceived Jesus' innocence: "this man has done nothing wrong." He may have meant that solely in the sense of "he has done nothing deserving of crucifixion," but it is, of course, true of Jesus over the whole of his life – we was *entirely* innocent, the only person ever to be so.

Fourthly, he confessed Jesus' greatness. And somehow he understood that even Jesus' death would not prevent the coming of his Kingdom. That's why he pleaded with him, "Jesus, remember me *when* you come into your kingdom." We can't know exactly what he imagined that Kingdom to be like, but it is a reasonable assumption that in some way he equated *Jesus'* Kingdom with *God's* Kingdom, and therefore a kingdom that continues beyond the grave.

And that leads us to his last recognition: that Jesus could help him, and might be *willing* to help him, despite his sin. "Jesus, remember *me* ..." Essentially, in some way, he asked Jesus to advocate for him in his judgement before God.

That is almost a textbook response to Jesus. He owned his own sin, and feared God's judgement as a result; he recognised Jesus' innocence and greatness; he believed Jesus' greatness would continue beyond the grave, and entrusted himself to Jesus' mercy to help him in his hour of need! This is what Jesus' crucifixion was all about – he sacrificed himself on the cross, taking the punishment our sin deserved, so that we could be forgiven from all our sin and be welcomed into his Kingdom.

That is why Jesus responded to this criminal's request positively. But I suspect that response still came as a shock to him. "Truly I tell you ..." this is my solemn word that it is true ... "today you will be with me in paradise." Paradise, I put to you, is the equivalent of what we call "Heaven." It is the place where the righteous rest after death. Jesus declares clearly that there is life beyond the grave. And he assures this man that, solely on the basis of his cry to Jesus for help, he will be in the place of the righteous beyond death. He wasn't baptised, he didn't have all his theology worked out into clear doctrines, and he didn't have time to start doing any good with his life. But he got into Paradise. Because God looks mercifully at our heart and at the direction that we are heading. This criminal's last-minute move towards Jesus was enough for his salvation.

And Jesus was clear that there would be no time delay: "*today*, you will be with me in paradise." The Jews tended to believe in a *final* resurrection at the end of time, and that before that everyone, good or bad, would go to Sheol – the place of the dead. But Jesus said, you will be in Paradise *today*. You will be consciously with me and my Father *today*.

And the same is true for anyone who dies recognising what this criminal recognised – namely that they are a great sinner, but that Jesus is an even greater Saviour.

Surprisingly, the Bible actually gives very little clear teaching about what Paradise or Heaven is like. Most of the descriptions that we associate with Heaven are really descriptions of the New Heaven and the New Earth that the Bible says Jesus will bring about when he returns at the end of time – I'll say much more about that on Sunday. But one thing that is clear is that Paradise is *Paradise* because we are consciously in Jesus' very near presence. Jesus did not merely say, "Today you will be in paradise," but crucially, "Today, you will be *with me* in paradise." And because Paradise is characterised by the very near presence of Jesus and his Father, it exceeds even the best of our experiences here on Earth.

This is great news for those of us who have lost loved ones who trusted in Jesus. We can be confident that they immediately began to experience a closer fellowship with Jesus than they had ever experienced on Earth. They are now at peace with Jesus. But what about those who died not knowing Jesus? Here we sadly cannot be so sure, but I would say this: rarely do we know what goes through someone's mind in the last hours or even moments of their lives. For this criminal (perhaps a murderer), this exchange just hours before his death was sufficient for Jesus to welcome *him* into Paradise. Therefore, anyone who has a similar exchange before death will likewise be welcomed into Paradise.

Of course, we what *can* ensure is that we *ourselves* will enjoy Paradise, by putting our trust in Jesus, like this criminal did. And the sooner we do that, the better. For, from the moment we say yes to Jesus we can begin to enjoy many of the benefits of Paradise here on Earth, even if to a lesser degree than when we eventually go there.

That is the probable primary significance of the other event that occurred as Jesus died – when the Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. Whether this was the curtain that separated the Outer Court from the Temple proper, or that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (as I believe more likely), what is clear is that this was a hugely significant symbolic event, which God caused to happen. And there may be more than one lesson we should draw from it. It may signify the end of the Temple's dominant role as the place to meet with God – prefiguring its total destruction less than forty years later. It may also signify God's desire to break out from the confines of his House, so as to reach out to all – Jews and Gentiles, men and women alike.

But, surely it also symbolises that the way to God's presence has been opened up fully through Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection! These temple curtains were the barriers of protection that kept people away from the potentially dangerous presence of God while the Old Covenant was in operation. But, through Jesus Christ's sacrifice, the danger in approaching God has been removed. For our sin, which might provoke his judgement, has been nailed to the cross, and the punishment for it meted out on Jesus. Therefore, we can now boldly approach his throne of mercy and find help for our time of need. The blessings of Paradise, or Heaven, have begun to be made available for us, here on Earth, even before we die.

This is why Good Friday, for me, is *the* most important day of the Christian year. Yes, it is meaningless without the Easter resurrection that followed, by which death was finally defeated. But there is a sense in which the resurrection was the inevitable result of the Author of Life being put to death. Death could never hold him in its grip. Whereas the crucifixion was God's chosen self-sacrifice for our salvation, so that we could be put right with God and welcomed into Paradise, and in time into the New Heavens and the New Earth to come, the consummation of God's Kingdom. So, I encourage you not to rush to Easter Sunday, but to dwell a while longer in the glories of Good Friday and the mysteries of Easter Saturday. Such that Easter, when it comes, can be even more glorious and life-giving. Amen?

**[Pray]**