

Lent Course 2020 from Luke's Gospel

Luke 23:32-43

Three Crosses, Two Criminals and Jesus

Luke spends more time on the two criminals than any of the other Gospels. They were guilty of serious crimes against the state.

One criminal makes the extraordinary effort to mock Jesus. A man on a cross struggles to breathe, let alone speak. With one of his last breaths, he abuses Jesus. He wants Jesus to prove himself, to get him off the cross. "Get me out of this mess, and I'll worship you."

And Jesus could have saved him, but that was not the kind of deliverance Jesus is offering. This criminal wanted some kind of cosmic genie to do for him what he wanted, when he wanted it. Sound familiar?

Jesus is more concerned with the state of our heart and our soul than our present circumstances. It is fine to pray "God help", but not so good to pray "God help, or else".

The second criminal gets this! How amazing is that! He realises that their greatest fear is the terror of meeting God. He did not believe for one minute in Roman justice, so when he says "we are getting what we deserve", he may be referring to the condemnation of God. Perhaps he realises that his death on the cross is only the beginning, not the end, of his suffering.

So he asks Jesus to remember him for good. Jesus makes him a huge promise, a promise of perfection. Jesus is the king, and he has the authority to admit anyone. You don't need to do anything to get to heaven. "With me" is the most important

part of the promise. Being with Jesus is the definition of paradise. Jesus is the hope of heaven. Jesus is the promise.

The first criminal wants Jesus to do something for him. The second criminal wants Jesus.

And on the third cross is Jesus himself, dispensing forgiveness. Forgiveness is a difficult idea and raises lots of questions, but without it we'd be stuffed. No happy marriages, no close friends, no good relationships between parents and children. We'd be exhausted by bearing grudges.

Who should be forgiven? Are there unforgivable things? What kind of apology is needed? Should behaviour change before forgiveness is offered? Can you forgive someone if they don't ask for it?

The Jews think they are doing God a favour by killing Jesus. Justice demands that God does not forgive them, but that's the wonder of the cross. Jesus did not only ask for people to be forgiven, he also made it possible for them to be forgiven. Forgiveness always comes at a cost. It cost Jesus his life.

If we won't forgive, we show that we haven't really understood that we need forgiveness ourselves. If we look at the wrong we have been done, it will be too great to cancel. If we look at the cross, and see it in the light of what Jesus has done, it will seem too small not to forgive.