

Message for April 15, 2022

Good Friday

Luke 23:26-46

Today being Good Friday, our focus quite naturally is on Jesus' death on the cross. The four gospel accounts of what happened that first Good Friday differ on some of the details but even so, they do agree on one thing and that is that Jesus did not die alone. Two other men were crucified alongside of him but how much do we know about these two unfortunates whose only claim to fame is the where and when of their deaths?

Virtually nothing; the gospel accounts simply tell us that they were criminals and more specifically, that they were thieves. Now normally where the Bible is silent, myth and legend rush in to fill the void, but not so in this case. Indeed there are very few stories or legends about them though according to one legend, the so-called good or penitent thief was named Dismas while the other was called Gestas. Are these names true? Probably not as the names didn't appear until hundreds of years after the crucifixion.

Truly, from the scholar's point of view the lack of stories and legends about these two criminals really is strange; it is almost as if the fact that Jesus was put to death along with some convicted criminals is somehow embarrassing. We do however know some things about those two men and far from being inappropriate, their dying alongside Jesus cuts to the very heart of what today is all about.

To begin with, back in those days there weren't any jails or prisons as we understand them. When a person went to 'jail' they were usually just kept in a person's home and stayed there until their trial. At the trial the accused was either found not guilty and set free or else found guilty and punished. Punishment however did not mean going back to 'jail'. If a person was a convicted thief, then he or she might have to pay restitution to the victim and a fine as well. If the felon persisted in wrongdoing, then that person might be branded, the scar proclaiming to everyone what the person was. If the thief still persisted in pursuing a life of crime then a hand might be cut off with the rationale being that it would be a lot harder to steal if the person was one-

handed. And if that failed to deter the person then the state resorted to the ultimate punishment, execution.

Well, the penalty for these two thieves was death by crucifixion so presumably they were viewed as being incorrigible and beyond all hope of redemption. Like Jesus then, they were nailed to a cross and condemned to a death so painful that we cannot really imagine it. Before the thieves died however, something else happened first.

According to Luke, one of the two thieves, and for convenience sake I will call him Gestas, turned to Jesus and covered him with abuse which is a polite way of saying that he said a lot of *very* impolite things.

Now it is easy enough to be critical of Gestas but really, who could blame him? Indeed if we are honest about it, are we not at least sometimes a little bit like Gestas? We are so to speak on a cross, whatever that cross may be. We have lost all hope and have no options left, and so we turn to God saying “Do something, save me! Prove that you are for real by getting me out of this mess”. Our demand may even sound like faith, but it isn’t. It isn’t because we, like Gestas, don’t really expect God to do anything; in fact we don’t even think that God *can* do anything. This, turning to God as the last resort, demanding that he do something even as we in our heart of hearts don’t think that he can or will, is pride and arrogance at its worst. And I wonder, how much pain did Gestas add to Jesus’ suffering that day? It is then that the second thief, whom I will call Dismas, spoke up.

“Don’t you fear God” he said to the other thief, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” And after that came his wonderful words of faith, hope, and trust: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

It is so easy to pass over these words but think about what Dismas was asking. He was an incorrigible criminal who was viewed as being beyond all hope of redemption. He had made a total mess of his life and was not a follower of Jesus either but even so, he still dared to ask Jesus: “Remember me”. And what was Jesus’ reply?

Wracked by a pain, both mental and physical that none of us can truly imagine, Jesus still found the love and grace to say: “I tell you the truth, today

you will be with me in paradise.” Today you will be with me in paradise was Jesus’ promise to Dismas, but what had he said or done to deserve this? Absolutely nothing. In the words of the Christian writer Max Lucado:

“No stained-glass homilies. No excuses. Just a desperate plea for help. At this point Jesus performs the greatest miracle of the cross. Greater than the earthquake. Greater than the tearing of the Temple curtain. Greater than the darkness. Greater than the resurrected saints appearing in the streets. He performs the miracle of forgiveness. A sin-soaked criminal is raised by a blood-soaked Saviour. Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Even that convicted dying criminal whom everyone else had thought was beyond all hope of redemption, wasn’t beyond the reach of God’s mercy, love, and forgiveness. And what went for him goes for us too. To be sure, we are followers of Jesus but how often do we mess up? What harm have we done to ourselves and others by the things that we have said and done? In the end Dismas’ plea is ours as well: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, and this is what Jesus does. Jesus’ promise to the thief is also his promise to each and every one of us: “I tell you the truth, you will be with me in paradise”. This is the good in Good Friday.

Pastoral Prayer

Hear us as we bow our heads before you in prayer, on this, the most solemn day on our Christian calendar.

We thank you for what it is we remember today, the dying and undying love of your Son on the cross. We thank you that he willingly chose to bear our sins and die, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that we might have life, now and forever in all of its glorious fullness. Help us to remember that while we are sinners, we are forgiven and redeemed sinners and that there is a world of difference between the two.

We pray this day for everyone for whom this Good Friday is not, for whatever reason, good. We pray for all weighed down by sin and guilt. We

pray for all lost in a world of pain, hurt and regret for what was and is. We pray for all who suffer at the hands of others.

We pray this day that you will help us to remember that your love, mercy, forgiveness, and redemption truly is over all that you have made. Help us to remember that even when we, whether it be because of pride, guilt, or forgetfulness, forget about you, you in your love never forget about us.

In your Son's name we pray. Amen