

The Penitent Thief

Luke 23:26-49

The man who called on the crucified Christ

When a criminal reached Golgotha, or The Place of The Skull, where the crucifixion would take place, his cross was laid flat upon the ground. Usually it was cross shaped, like a capital T, with no top piece against which the head could rest. It was quite low so that the criminal's feet were only 2 or 3 feet above the ground. The victim's hands were stretched out upon the crossbar, and the nails were driven through his hands. The feet were not nailed, but only loosely bound to the cross. Halfway up the cross there was a projecting piece of wood called the saddle, which took the weight of the criminal; otherwise the nails would have torn through his hands. The cross was then lifted and set upright in its socket. Roman crucifixion was a time of terror; imagine the pain the criminal was suffering, it was terrible. However it was not enough to kill, and further suffering followed as the victim was left to die of hunger and thirst beneath the blazing noontide sun and the frosts of night. As people watched, the process was meant to be a deterrent and a public warning of what happened if you rebelled.

This is what Jesus had to endure for each one of us and to make matters worse the authorities placed him between two known criminals. It was deliberate so that Jesus would be humiliated. As well as experiencing the physical pain of a beating with leather straps containing small pieces of metal, of trying to carry his cross and then crucifixion, Jesus had to endure psychological warfare as he listened to the insults of those who were watching the proceedings. There were the jeers of the religious rulers who shouted, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One". Followed by the mocking of the Roman soldiers, "If you are the King of the Jews save yourself".

Next to join in was one of the criminals who shouted, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Then the mood and atmosphere changes for just a moment as the other criminal spoke. Perhaps he had been impressed by the prayer of Jesus before the insults began, when he had asked that God would forgive those who were putting him to death. Rather than take the easy option and follow the crowd, he rebuked the other robber "Don't you fear God 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". Turning to Jesus he asks, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom". This man is sometimes called the penitent thief.

Let us consider three characteristics of the penitent thief:

(A) His Honesty

He admitted that he had done wrong and he and his fellow criminal had deserved their punishment. He knew that he had made a mess of his life and was prepared to admit that. Is it not true that we sometimes fail to see our own faults and failings, and if we do realise that we have them, that we try to cover them up. We look at ourselves through rose tinted glasses. How does our lifestyle stand up to the demands of the 10 commandments? How many of these laws do we keep each day? Are we putting God first in our lives? Do we use God's name as a swear word and do we treat Sunday as a holy and special day? How would we score when it comes to respecting our parents, stealing, adultery, killing, bearing false witness and coveting? Are we attaining even a 50% pass rate?

All of us are guilty of sin in our lives, but the wonderful news is that the man next to the penitent thief at Calvary died for our sins, so that we might have forgiveness free. As St Paul reminds us in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, the purpose of the Law and the Commandments is to show what sin is, but salvation cannot be achieved by trying to fulfil every part of the Law, but salvation comes by justification by faith in that we believe that Christ died so that we might experience forgiveness. Having accepted this, we are not free to do what we like but we must live a life guided by what Paul calls 'holy living'. Each day we need to turn to God's grace and seek forgiveness for those continuing times when we fall short of his standards.

(B) The penitent thief was prepared to stand up for what he knew to be right

He could so easily have joined with those who were having a go at Jesus and hurling insults at him. However in reply to the comments of the other robber he stated, "But this man has done nothing wrong". He was praising Jesus and acknowledging that Jesus did not deserve the terrible ordeal he was experiencing. Are we as individuals prepared to praise others or do we resent that they have been successful? We live in a largely negative society, which likes to highlight the failures rather than promote the positives. Let us focus on and acknowledge the positives.

The penitent thief was very brave in that he witnessed to truth about Jesus. What the Church needs today are Christians who are prepared to witness to their faith. There is no sphere of life today which is not crying out for witnessing

Christians who are prepared to take their Christianity into the arena of life with them. We need to apply those words of Jesus, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven".

It needs to apply in our homes, in our church, in business and commerce, on the field of sport, in the world of entertainment, in the sphere of education, in the life of politics. As a student I was fascinated by the impact that Christian men like Wilberforce and Shaftesbury had in Parliament, as they strived to abolish the slave trade and horrendous working conditions in mines and factories. The motivating factor was to put their faith into practice.

Our Christian witness should never be a matter of criticism, or fault finding or superiority. It should be one of purity, love and courage. People do respect those who have courage, and no doubt some of those at Calvary respected the thief who had the courage to say what they knew to be true. It is sometimes not easy to stand out from the crowd, to be courageous enough to speak the truth or give Christian witness. If we do we may well influence others who may come off the fence or be prepared to change their opinion. What a challenge we have!

(C) It is never too late to turn to Christ

The thief said to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom". There are other things of which we must say, "The time for that is past. I am too old now". But we can never say that when it comes to turning to Jesus. So long as a person's heart beats the invitation of Christ still stands.

As the poet wrote of the man who was killed as he was thrown from his galloping horse, "Betwixt the stirrup and the ground, Mercy I asked, Mercy I found".

It is literally true that while there is life there is hope! It was true in the case of the penitent thief because Jesus replied with the words, "This is the truth, I tell you. Today you will be with me in paradise".

As this man was about to die he turned to Christ for forgiveness and Christ accepted him. This reminds us that our deeds don't save us – our faith in Christ does. Our lives will be much more useful and fulfilling if we turn to God

early, but even those who repent at the very last moment will be with God in paradise.

This dying criminal at this point in time had more faith than the rest of Jesus' followers put together. Although the disciples continued to love Jesus, their hopes for the kingdom were shattered. Most of them had gone into hiding. As one of his followers sadly said 2 days later, "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel". By contrast the penitent thief looked at Jesus and said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom". By all appearances at Calvary the kingdom was finished. How awe inspiring is this man's faith who alone saw beyond the present shame to the coming glory! That glory was to come with the risen Lord.

Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the most high God, you didst empty yourself and give your whole life to us, even unto death, the death of the cross. Grant us to receive so immeasurably a gift with penitence, gladness and thankfulness; help us to hold back nothing of ourselves from others and from you in all areas of our life; thank you that you are ready to receive us at any time, for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Amen