

Sermon - 'Jesus, remember me'

And one of the thieves turned to Jesus and said: "**Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom**".

You know there is a taize chant based on this particular passage. It is based on the request made by one of the two thieves who hung either side of Christ at Golgotha. The lyricist of that particular chant made no attempt to add anything beyond those simple words, "**Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom**". The melody is haunting. It's one of those songs that makes the hairs on my arm stand on end and tears well in my eyes. And I particularly chose that piece to be played recently at the close of a dear friend's funeral.

For me the haunting element is that the request is so simple, so direct, so honest. There is nothing dressed up about it. No appeal to Christ about how worthy, or how deserving of recognition or reward the asker was. There, at the point of Christ earthly death, we have a stark and vivid illustration of why Christ came to earth and the conflicting reactions and responses of those who witnessed and heard Him.

But there was not just one thief in this discourse but two. Fulfilling the prophecy made thousands of years before in Isaiah that Christ was to "*pour out his life unto death, and be numbered with the transgressors*". Two transgressors, presenting two conflicting reactions. One who saw the divinity of Christ in the person who hung beside him and the other who cursed Him and insulted him.

If we re-read this passage we see that Christ's on the cross had already clearly demonstrated His love for mankind by his appeal to the Father to "**forgive, for they know not what they do**". But those words were now to be thrown back in Jesus face by the other thief who shouted back "**if you are the Christ, save yourself and us!**"

This thief, like the other, had had every opportunity to recognise the divinity and Kingship of Christ. He too had witnessed Christ say not a word of condemnation to the soldiers as they drove home the nails. He too had heard Christ's appeal to His Father to forgive, he too had witnessed His gentle concern for His mother and those left behind - yet **his** eyes were blind to that which was before him. All wrapped up as he was in his concern to save himself. You know there is currently a great wayside notice at a church near my home in the UK that reads '**there is no smaller package in the world than one that is all wrapped up in themselves**';

How true this was of **that** thief.

And on the other side hung the thief who recognised the self-control, the forgiveness and love of Jesus, recognised that **He** truly was the One who bore the title, mockingly given Him by the soldiers, '**The King of the Jews**'. This thief's response was not to be one of anger, bitterness and spite but rather of contrition, confession

and humility. As he called out to his fellow conspirator ***“we justly hang here, for we receive the due reward for our deeds”***

These transgressors were commonly thought to be thieves or bandits, some translations referred to them as robbers. If this was the case their theft would have also combined GBH rather like the robbers portrayed in the good Samaritan parable. They **were** justly paying for **their** crimes. They deserved their punishment. Jesus did not.

So here we have two conflicting reactions coming from two people faced with the same experience of Jesus. One who recognise the unique Kingly quality and truth of Christ and One who was blind to see only the needs of himself.

But as with all the questions addressed to Jesus the question from the thief was not to be left unanswered, ***“Assuredly,”*** Jesus replies, ***“I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”*** What sweet words to drop from His lips. How the heart of the hearer must have leapt for joy. A promise of salvation and more.

William Barclay the 20-century author, radio and TV presenter, church of Scotland Minister and Professor of Divinity wrote of this passage:

‘The word “Paradise” is a Persian word meaning “a walled garden”. When a Persian king wished to do one of his subjects a very special honour he made him a “companion of the garden” and he was chosen to walk in the royal garden with the king’.

You see it was more than **immortality** that Jesus promised the penitent thief. He promised him the honoured place of a **‘companion** of the garden in the courts of heaven’. ***“You will be with me”*** said Jesus.

Why did Jesus give such an honour to this stranger, to this rascal, to this sinner of sinners? What had he done or demonstrated in that brief conversation that was so remarkable that it deserved such an honour? What can we learn about Jesus and His grace from this action? And what can we learn for our own relationship with Christ?

Well I believe it was for a number of reasons that Jesus made this promise. Reasons that are all buried within the text of this conversation.

Firstly the robber had a reverence before the Lord God. ***“Don’t you even fear God”*** the one robber said to the other. In Proverbs it says ***‘you will know what it means to fear the Lord’***. In Ecclesiastics ***‘Fear God, and keep his commandments’***: Fear and reverence is an essential aspect of this conversion experience and remains true for us today.

Secondly he was prepared to acknowledge his sin. ***“We deserve this punishment”*** he said to the other robber – we are guilty. No ducking the truth or excuse making – guilty as charged!

Thirdly he was prepared to confess his sin, turn from that sin and do it in a very public way before the gathered crowds. But what was more important still was that he was prepared to confess his guilt and sin before Jesus.

And fourthly that robber professed his faith, his belief, in the one who had all authority, all power and all supremacy. As our reading from the letter to the Colossians this morning reminded us '**He (that is Jesus) is the image of the invisible God.**' The robber saw this in Jesus. He recognised '**the King**' foretold so many years before in our other reading from Jeremiah. He recognised that the time was right for Him to come into his kingdom.

This is what Jesus was able to recognise in this robber – this is why He said to him "**today you will be with me in Paradise**"

As an aside to the main message there is also another lesson I think for us from this text – and that is it is never too late to confess Christ as Saviour – even, yes even to include death bed conversions.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, early in his ministry it was said that he found little comfort in his religion. He craved certainty of his own salvation. One day he led a prisoner to Christ whilst the prisoner was on his way to the gallows. The prisoner was immediately converted. John was astonished. He himself had been struggling for years to have that certainty that the prisoner before him had. Yet this man had been transformed instantly. The lesson **here**, and the lesson from **the cross**, is it is never too late to find salvation. But I digress.

Today in the church calendar we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. The Sunday before we enter the time of Advent. **Christ the King Sunday** helps us all to focus on the character of Christ and his reign over the whole world. It is a proclamation to all, that everything in creation in heaven and earth must submit to **Christ as King**. And it also invites us to actively and joyfully submit ourselves to his rule.

Not many on that fateful day at Golgotha were to recognise the kingship of Jesus. Not many were to submit themselves to His rule. But that thief did - and that decision was to change the course of his future.

So how about us? You and me. Which side of the cross do we find ourselves standing? Do we fear and worship the Lord like that thief? Have we recognised, confessed and turned from our sins as he did? Do we live our lives in recognition and obedience to the Kingship of Jesus?

Friends I pray that together we, like that thief; may be able to cry with **faith** and with **confidence**:

"Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom"

Amen