

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

During the first three centuries, Christians had not yet agreed upon what we know now as the church year—the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. For them—at least in the understanding of such authors as mid-20th century English liturgical scholar Gregory Dix—each Sunday was a celebration of the full cycle of Jesus’ life and ministry. Since the 4th century we have focused on one thing at a time. We have a season in which we will think about Jesus’ birth, another in which we remember his fasting and prayer, another in which we celebrate the resurrection, and yet another when we recall the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Yet some signs remain in the lectionary of that older approach—times when the tidy pattern of considering one part of the narrative of salvation at a time breaks down. This is one of those occasions. We are in the last week of the great season of Pentecost, but rather than remembering the coming of the Spirit or the Lord’s teaching as manifested in the church, we have a lesson about Jesus’ death on the cross. We do well at times to recall the big picture, the whole drama of salvation.

The version of the crucifixion that we hear today is from Luke’s Gospel, the Gospel from which most of our lessons have come in Lectionary Year C. Each one of the Gospel writers tells the story of Christ’s death on the cross in his own way. In this case, Luke includes a conversation between the two thieves on the cross, and Jesus’ response to one of those thieves. One of the thieves joins in the ridicule of Jesus, while the other admits his own guilt and the innocence of Jesus, and says to him **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”**

People often attribute Luke’s attention here to thieves to his concern for the outsiders. And this makes a great deal of sense. Luke is the Gospel author who writes for a Greek audience, who tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the one who remembers the beatitudes as a blessing of the poor and not the metaphorically “poor in Spirit,” and the one who leaves out the story in which Jesus compares a Canaanite woman to a dog because she was not Jewish. The Gospel account of Jesus’ conversation with the thieves on the cross is an example of Luke’s concern for the outsider, but that is not all that is going on.

The heart of the Christian Gospel is that Jesus’ death on the cross is an event that not only had significance for him but for all of us as well. The affirmation of the connection between his death and resurrection, and our forgiveness and hope of everlasting life is one of the oldest gospel messages and it runs through all of Christian theology. Our prayer book often expresses that connection with the theme of union. Our catechism explains that **“the inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection.”** (BCP, 858) We ask in Eucharistic Prayer B that God **“unite us to your Son in his sacrifice, that we may be acceptable through him.”** (BCP, 369). And in the Morning Prayer Easter Canticle, *Christ Our Passover*, we quote Paul to the effect that **“Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us.”**

The gospel writers have a wonderful way of including in their accounts elements that underline the unity between what Christ has done and the forgiveness of our sin. The connection is often made through the addition of specific details. Both Matthew and John, for example, provide dialogue for the opponents of Jesus to make the point. In John’s gospel the high priest who seeks Jesus’ death explains his actions by

saying, **“It is better . . . to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”** (John 11:50) In Matthew’s Gospel the crowd that has called for Jesus’ arrest responds to Pilate declaration that he would have let Jesus go and was innocent of his death by declaring **“His blood be on us and on our children.”** (Matthew 27:25) Those who have used that passage as a ground for anti-Semitism miss the point. It is not intended to point blame at the nation of Israel, but at us. Those congregations that jointly recite those words in the recitation of the Passion narrative on the week before Easter get it right. We are the crowd and we are the ones who hope-to use the words of 19th century Evangelical Christians--to be washed in the blood of the Lamb, to receive the benefit of his death. It is for our sins he dies, and by his death we are redeemed.

The Discovery Channel has or will soon run a special entitled "Penguins: Waddle All the Way," a photographic study of the life of Penguins. John Downer, the director of the film, has been making the round of talk shows in order to promote it. I saw an interview with him this past week. He had a very simple idea. He wanted to photograph animals from as close up as possible without letting them know that they were being observed. Shooting from too great a distance made it possible to miss important moments; coming too close distracted the penguins and changed the scene that was photographed. His solution was to make robots equipped with cameras so that he could come right up into the penguins’ faces and catch intimate details that would have otherwise been lost.

Luke uses something a little like that mechanism within his account of the crucifixion. As we have seen John uses the high priest’s conversation that sets in motion Jesus’ arrest as the way to comment on the significance of what will follow. Matthew uses the crowd who witness his judgment before Pilate. Luke draws even closer to the central events. He uses the thieves on the cross like the robot penguins. They are the lenses that zero in on Jesus’ face and catch his intimate conversation as he is dying. The good thief represents us in those moments in which we recognize that on our own we always fall short of the kingdom of God. No matter how we try, we always have some measure of self love and self interest, even in our best actions. We do good to be seen to do good, to impress others, or to make up for something that we have done wrong and want to hide. And even when we do not actively do that which is wrong, we sin by omission, turning our backs on others in need. It is our predicament that the thief sums up when he admits, **“we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”** And it is with him that we turn to Jesus and ask for what we know we do not deserve, **““Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** Just as surely, Jesus’ words are for us, when he declares, **"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."**

So, on this last Sunday in Pentecost, we end up at the heart of Christian theology—the story of Christ’s death on the cross. And Luke uses the thieves on the cross as the lens to make the significance of that death clear. It is a death that brings us pardon and hope.

And the thief said, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”**

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