

In Nomine Iesu

“There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’ And they divided His garments and cast lots. And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.’ The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.’ And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’” (Luke 23:32-43)

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

Tonight we come to the end of our Lenten series, Witnesses to the Passion of Christ in the Gospel of St. Luke. This evening we view the suffering of Christ through the eyes of the those condemned with Him. Of these two we know very little. Both were thieves. Evidently, their crimes were serious enough to warrant the death penalty. They were probably career criminals. Since they had received the death penalty, it could only be that their sentence had come at the direction of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. They would have been tried and condemned with Jesus that same morning. So, they too had been led by the centurion and his soldiers along the same route from the Praetorium, where Pilate had judged them, through the city, to the place of the skull, where executions were carried out.

When they got to the place of execution they were prepared by the soldiers for their execution. They were stripped and nailed to their crosses. As the cross lay on the ground it was the Roman custom that a sign be attached to the cross of each to state the nature of their crime. On theirs would have been written, “thief.” But on the cross of the third Man was written, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” It was a strange thing to write as the reason for an execution. It would have been clear that it was this third Man that was the object of everyone’s attention.

After the preparations were finished, each of the crosses were lifted up and set into the ground. And the crowd began to taunt and jeer. So, the thieves heard what the crowd was saying to, and about, Jesus. They saw the way the priests, elders, and scribes mocked Him. They witnessed how the crowd taunted Him with the words, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.” (v. 35) St. Matthew reports, “Those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ Likewise the

chief priests also, mocking Him with the scribes and elders, said, 'He saved others, Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, "I am the Son of God."' Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing." (Matthew 27:39-44) In other words, in their misery the thieves joined with the crowd in condemning Jesus.

At some point in time as one thief jeered with the crowd, and said to Jesus, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us," (v. 39) the other thief reminded him sharply of where he was and what awaited them. Evidently, the nearness of his own death had brought him to his senses. But his rebuke of his partner had little effect. Did the first thief not regret his fate, even fear what awaited him on this the day of his death? He surely must have. But he could not see beyond his own selfish interest and pride. He could not see that the cause of his own death lay with himself. In his misery and resentment he vented his anger toward God, raging against his Creator for all the terrible things that had fallen on him throughout his life.

Finally, the second thief said to him, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Something within the second thief had changed. Something he heard had caused him to look at himself again, and to look at the Man who hung beside him. In the second thief we see an attitude opposite that of the first, but also opposite that which he had himself made known only a short time before. The thoughts of his heart were revealed, and they had changed! Now, just hours from the end of his own life, he recognized his guilt, and confessed that he indeed was deserving of death. His contrition stands out all the more because we hear it against the background of the curses of his fellow thief and the jeers of the great crowd of spectators. He confessed his guilt openly. Not only that, but in his confession he recognized that Christ's kingdom is a kingdom of grace where sinners are forgiven, where the condemned are given life. In other words, when he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom," he confessed that Jesus was the very One the jeering crowd said He was not. He was the King of Israel, the promised Messiah. In light of such faith, Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Jesus own disciples had fled in fear and unbelief. The crowd taunted and laughed. The chief priests, scribes and elders jeered and mocked. In the midst of this display of unbelief, this man confessed his sins before God and his faith before men. What a powerful demonstration this was of the miracle of faith and of the grace of God in Christ. What a fulfillment of Jesus' own words. For here in the second thief we see the truth that Jesus Himself predicted when He said. "'And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.'" (John 12:32) In the presence of Christ crucified for sinners, this thief believed and confessed. A brief time later, so would the centurion. Then later that afternoon as the sun hung low, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea would also show themselves to be disciples of Christ. As the hours and days followed Christ's crucifixion, these few would be joined by dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, and finally even millions. All would be drawn to Him who was lifted up from the earth for us.

St. Paul said: “With the heart man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” (Romans 10:10) The thief confessed his faith in the crucified Savior. Let us note well what St. Paul said immediately after that, “For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on [Christ] will not be put to shame.” (Romans 10:11) He confessed with his mouth and was comforted by the Lord of life Himself. His sins were forgiven. The God of grace and mercy opened to him the way to eternal life even in the midst of death and evil.

As we conclude our Lenten series on this striking example of the grace of God, let us note that while the penitent thief provides us an example of a person converted in the last hour, this must be set against the many exhortations of the prophets, apostles, and our Lord Himself, to train up children in the way they should go, to hear regularly the word of grace, and to observe all things He has commanded so that we might have the certainty of His continued presence and blessing in word and sacrament. So, we are here tonight not to see in the thief an example of how we can wait until the last moment to repent and believe. Rather we are to see in him the great wonder and beauty of the love of God in Jesus Christ, especially in the face of so much despair and ugliness. We are to see that in all things God is faithful. He will save all who call upon His name. He will save them not because they are good, but because He is good and gracious and sent His Son into the world to save us. God grant that all here this evening find the same wonder and beauty in Christ that the repentant thief found, and treasure it for a lifetime. For this reason Christ came into the world – to save sinners. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria