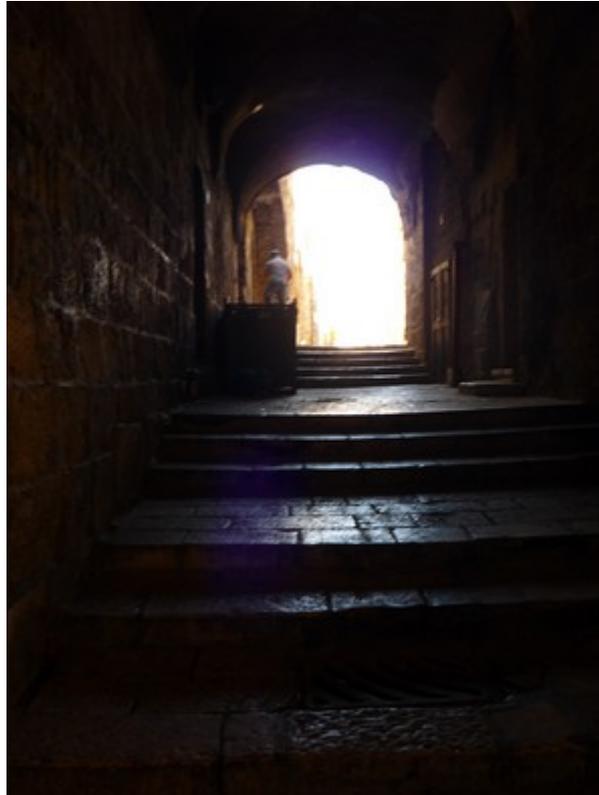


TFTD L30 The penitent thief

Maundy Thursday April 14th: Luke 23: 32-43

Today's reflection comes from Robin.



One of the criminals who were hanging there derided him, saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we rightly so, for we are getting what we deserve for what we did, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

What did the penitent thief mean when he asked Jesus to remember him?

The purpose of crucifixion was to impose a humiliating and excruciating death on the victim. Victims of crucifixion would be flogged and brutalised before being led through the city carrying their own cross, the means of their own death. They would then be nailed to the cross and their bleeding and brutalised bodies would be naked. And crowds would come and mock them as they died.

There was the official mocking; the sign that read 'This is the King of the Jews'. The soldiers who had done the flogging and brutalising would lead the

crowd, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” And we are told that the rulers put in an appearance. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

And even one of the thieves crucified with him joined in. “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” Why did that thief do that? Why do people do that? We see that so often, don’t we? A person or people being bullied and exploited and instead of fighting back against their oppressor they turn round to see if there is somebody else they can bully. Maybe this thief joined in with mocking Jesus so that the scoffers would not pick on him. Maybe feeling he still had the power to add to somebody else’s misery seemed to make his own suffering slightly less awful.

But the other thief saw things differently and he admonished the other thief. First of all he reminded him about God. “Don’t you fear God?” he asked. And then he appealed to his sense of solidarity. “You are under the same sentence.” We are all suffering together. And then he points out Christ’s innocence. “This man has done nothing wrong.”

Having finished admonishing the other thief, he now turns to Jesus. What can he say to comfort him? How can he undo the damage the other thief has done? How can he help Jesus find the strength to mentally resist those who mock him? Maybe he had heard Jesus speak about the Kingdom. Maybe he had heard about it second hand. “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your Kingdom,” he said.

Did he himself believe in this kingdom of which Jesus had spoken? It does not seem likely as he viewed Jesus’ tormented body and heard the insults being directed at him. Jesus looked a long way from being a king now. It seems to me more likely that these words are to be understood as an act of kindness to a fellow sufferer. An act of solidarity was all that he could offer Jesus. I think he showed Jesus an act of kindness not knowing really who he was. It was this unknowing act of kindness and solidarity that became a means of God’s grace to him.

I don’t believe God gave us his only Son to be one final take it or leave chance for redemption. I don’t believe that God showed his people mercy over and over again and then ran out of patience and sent Jesus to be our final chance to repent of our sins and join him in paradise. I think God’s mercy is unending and I believe it is at work in the world today and I think that is what we see on the cross.

What did Jesus say when he was crucified? “Father, forgive them, for they do not

know what they are doing.” Jesus knows the Father. He knows he does not ask in vain for forgiveness for those who crucified him and mocked him. The penitent thief is not the only thief whose sins were forgiven that day. Those who did not know what they were doing were also forgiven.

Of course, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, none of those who are crucified with Jesus show him any kindness. In these Gospels everybody mocked Jesus; the rulers, the soldiers and the other people being executed.

Which leaves us wondering why Luke remembered things differently.

I think the reason for this is that Luke was always particularly alert to signs of penitence and signs of forgiveness. His Gospel is the only Gospel that contains the parable of the Prodigal Son, a parable about astonishing forgiveness. In his telling of the story of the woman who anointed Jesus he is the only Gospel writer to include a reference to the woman being a sinner. And he is the only Gospel writer to record the parable of the dishonest steward who stumbles in grace as if by accident and is forgiven.

Luke sets his telling of the parable of the prodigal Son in a gathering of who need forgiveness. This is how chapter 15 of Luke’s Gospel starts:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

This is the context in which Jesus told first the parable of the lost sheep, then the parable of the lost coin and finally the parable of the prodigal Son. Luke always remembers how often Jesus reached out to sinners. How he moved among them. And how he believed in them.

So really it should not surprise us that Luke remembered something different about the crucifixion. He remembers that even at the crucifixion itself, Jesus uttered words calling for God’s forgiveness so that there was never at any point in his life and ministry that Jesus did not bear witness to the unending mercy of God.

And even among the thieves who were crucified with him there was one who showed him kindness and in return received a promise of the eternal life that God offers to all humanity through his Son Jesus Christ. And Jesus affirmed the man who showed him mercy.

The fact is that God never withdraws his mercy; he never turns his back to us; and for good reason because even among those whom we have condemned, God knows that faith can be found. In the book of Joshua, Rahab the prostitute instinctively stepped forward to help Joshua's spies and in the same way on Golgotha itself, the place of the skull, a crucified thief reached out to Jesus. Even there the spirit of solidarity and love between one human being and another was alive.

That is what happens when the Son of God is crucified. He comes to meet humanity in its very worst moments, he proclaims God's forgiveness and affirms those unlikely people who still know how to love God and love their neighbour. He came to be with us in our suffering so we may be sure that we are all destined to be with him in paradise.

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