

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 1)

Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

SCRIPTURE READING.....Luke 23:35-43, KJV

<sup>35</sup>And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. <sup>36</sup>And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, <sup>37</sup>And saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. <sup>38</sup>And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. <sup>39</sup>And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. <sup>40</sup>But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup>And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. <sup>42</sup>And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. <sup>43</sup>And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>43</sup>And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

And so it is that our Lord spoke a second, and most gracious word, from the Cross. In his first word, Jesus surveyed the group of soldiers who crucified him and perhaps the crowds who derided him, and he prayed for mercy on them: "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." This time, our Lord lays his gracious gaze upon one sinner in particular — a thief, a malefactor, a brigand — and promises him heaven. Thus a bad man — a very bad man — whose only virtue was that he turned to Christ with his dying breath was granted paradise.

Let us begin the story of the thief on the cross by giving credit to both the sinner and the Saviour in their final hours. Crucifixion, they say, was designed by the Roman Empire to cause misery — not just death, but extended

agony culminating in death. Somehow, both Jesus and the sinner fought through their misery and the shock into which they were probably drifting and managed to take notice of each other.

Jesus notices the change in the thief. Amidst the horrors of crucifixion and the chaos and mocking of it all, this thief there on the right somehow softens. Seldom before had the man spoken so gently. Seldom before had any sight softened the man. Poverty and perhaps even murder had followed in his wake through life. He admitted that the Roman sentence of DEATH was appropriate for him. Yet, now, at the end of his life, the man softens, defends Jesus from the railing of the other thief, and speaks gently to Jesus:

<sup>42</sup>And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

And wonder of wonders, Jesus notices the man. Devastated by exhaustion and heartbreak

and all he has gone through, Jesus still has a large enough heart that he can hear and appreciate the words of a dying criminal. Jesus does not resist him and say, "Please, leave me alone. I am so very weary. Let me at least die in peace." No, even in his death throes, Jesus remains a man of remarkable consistency. He came to seek and save those who are lost. And with his dying breath, he is still hard at work at his holy work.

But let us praise too the thief, for he too fought through his pain and shock in order to take notice of Jesus. Indeed, he has fought through the opinion of the crowds, who joined together in mocking Jesus. Even in his misery, the thief credited Jesus with being a reason for hope in this world and perhaps even hope in the next. And the man was exactly right.

Therefore, let no sinner among us ever despair of Christ. Let no one judge that it is too late in the day to turn to Christ. Let no one condemn himself, herself, by saying "I am too old, too stubborn, too set in my ways. I can never change nor begin to walk with Jesus." In the most dire of circumstances, this thief changed. And if there is any hint of sadness in his story it is simply that he had no time left to manifest to the world that he was a changed man, a better man, because he had come to Jesus.

"Friend of sinners!" It was the early complaint concerning Jesus; it is the eternal hope of sinners.

Recently I read a kind of parable about Jesus welcoming the sinner. It was a dream about folk entering heaven — even sinners being welcomed:

Have you never heard of him who dreamed that he stood without the gate of heaven, and while there he heard sweet music from a band of venerable persons who were on their way to glory? They entered the celestial portals, and there were great rejoicing and shouts. Enquiring "What are these?" he was told that

they were the goodly fellowship of the prophets. He sighed, and said, "Alas! I am not one of those." He waited a while, and another band of shining ones drew nigh, who also entered heaven with hallelujahs, and when he enquired, "Who are these, and whence came they?" the answer was, "These are the glorious company of the apostles." Again he sighed, and said, "I cannot enter with them." Then came another body of men white-robed, and bearing palms in their hands, who marched amid great acclamation into the golden city. These he learned were the noble army of martyrs; and again he wept, and said, "I cannot enter with these." In the end he heard the voices of much people, and saw a greater multitude advancing, among whom he perceived Rahab and Mary Magdalene, David and Peter, Manasseh and Saul of Tarsus, and he espied especially the thief, who died at the right hand of Jesus. These all entered in—a strange company. Then he eagerly enquired, "Who are these?" and they answered, "This is the host of sinners saved by grace." Then was he exceeding glad, and said, "I can go with these." Yet, he thought there would be no shouting at the approach of this company, and that they would enter heaven without song; instead of which, there seemed to rise a seven-fold hallelujah of praise unto the Lord of love; for there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over sinners that repent. (Spurgeon's sermon, "The Believing Thief")

Notice how sweet was the promise Jesus made to the dying thief. It was promise of paradise, yes, but even more glorious is the

little prepositional phrase just before mention of heaven:

<sup>43</sup>And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be *with me* in paradise.

And that is enough for any soul: to spend eternity with Jesus. Indeed, in one of our most lovely hymns in our *Lutheran Book of Worship* we confess that even heaven itself would be “void and bare” if Jesus is not there:

Lord, thee I love with all my heart;  
I pray thee, ne'er from me depart;  
with tender mercy cheer me.  
Earth has no pleasure I would share,  
yea, heav'n itself were void and bare  
if thou, Lord, wert not near me.

When all is said and done, the greatest blessing in the life of this dying thief was simply that he looked to his side and found his Savior. Though Jesus was weak in body, he was strong to save.

And now, you and I look about — not to our side, but straight ahead — and there He is again! This same Jesus who saved the thief from of old meets you and me now in the blessed sacrament, and he is still the same, still strong to save.

To him belongs glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.