

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
4/22/2011, Good Friday

The Seven Last Words, at St. Ignatius Loyola Church
The Second Word: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43, RSV)¹

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43, RSV)

The story of Jesus starts with an extraordinary act of faith and ends with one too. At the beginning, we have the faith of Mary, who entirely surrendered her life into the hands of the God of Israel, though it was a strange, strange life to which she was being called. That young woman, with all the hopes and dreams natural for a young person, was being asked to set aside an ordinary life in order to bear the holy Child. It was a pregnancy and a calling beyond any normal understanding, but she cast her young life into the hands of God and gave her answer, "Let it be with me according to your Word."

Now, at the end of the earthly life of Jesus we again encounter another tremendous story of faith: the faith of the thief dying on the cross. This man weathered every countervailing impulse and cast himself into the hands of another Man dying on a cross.

Mary was young with all life before her. The thief was old and played out. He had so mismanaged his life that he had no more time left. He was not facing a life before him, but rather leaving this world and facing eternity before him. But like Mary, he departs from the ordinary course of things and takes his stand where his heart leads him, to Jesus of Nazareth, the only begotten Son of God.

Somehow this man heard what no one else seemed to hear: he heard the prayer of Jesus. And that prayer touched the heart of the thief. Jesus had prayed for those who were crucifying him. They had treated him roughly throughout the night of interrogation, and now they pierced his body with cruel hands, with spikes driven through human flesh, along with all the agony of crucifixion. Yet Jesus had prayed for those who crucified him:

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.
(Luke 23:34, KJV)

No one relented in face of this gracious prayer. The soldiers simply "parted his raiment, and cast lots," treating the death of a man as an occasion for some financial profit. But the thief on the cross heard that prayer and was changed by it -- changed for the better.

¹ This sermon benefits much from Martin Luther's sermon of 1529 for Holy Saturday Morning.

It is a wonder that the thief could hear and take stock of the prayer of Jesus, for the thief too was in agony. Somehow, he fought through his exhaustion and pain and recognized the holiness of Jesus in that prayer.

Not only did the man fight through his exhaustion and pain, but also he fought through the united testimony of the world against Jesus. The crowds and the guards mocked Jesus. They jested at him. They treated him with contempt, in full accordance with the judicial judgment that he was worthy of death through crucifixion. But the thief on the cross was able to see beyond the official condemnation of Jesus and beyond the insults hurled toward Jesus, and was able to perceive that Jesus was innocent.

And so it is that at the end of his mismanaged life, the thief became a penitent and a preacher.

He defended Jesus to the other thief on the cross. And the innocence he recognized in Jesus was not a general principle that no one deserved death by crucifixion, but rather that *Jesus* did not deserve it, though *he himself* did. And so he preaches to the other thief on the cross. He preaches the justice of the matter. He does not complain about what is happening to himself, nor to the other thief, but only protests that Jesus does not deserve their fate:

³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. ⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? (Luke 23:39-40, KJV)

Martin Luther once pointed out that it is easy enough to confess “I am a sinner” if the punishment of sin is off in the distance². But it is a very different matter if the punishment is right at hand. And so it was for the thief on the cross. The punishment he bore for his life of crime was not some abstraction or some future threat, but was his present reality, whipping him around like a ragdoll. He confessed his guilt from within the very midst of awful punishment.

So he did this thing -- he confessed his guilt -- but he also went beyond it in proclaiming the innocence of Jesus. In those few moments on the cross, this thief took all the steps that lead one to Christ. He confessed his sin, he proclaimed the goodness of Christ, and he threw himself in hope upon the mercy of Jesus:

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. (Luke 23:42, KJV)

“These are simple words,” Luther says, “but the heart of the thief is greater than heaven and earth. Even in the midst of this gruesome affair he could confess the Christian faith.”

² Luther’s sermon of 1529 for Holy Saturday Morning.

That was all the goodness this man had time for. Something about Jesus had touched the heart of the thief, and he did what lay possible for him to do with it: he confessed his sin and turned in faith toward Jesus.

I find it easy to believe that if this thief had suddenly been released from his cross and nursed back to health, he would have gone on to be a great man in this world -- perhaps a saint, perhaps even an apostle. But his time had run out and he died. Now, the good he does, he does in Paradise. And our earth misses the good he could have done.

But you and I remain on this earth. In various ways, we have followed the pattern of the thief on the cross. We have confessed our sins. Indeed, sometimes we almost fall on our knees, hungering for the confession service at the start of the liturgy. We have shared the thief's confession of sin and we have shared his judgment of Jesus: that Jesus is innocent and he is king of kings and lord of lords. Indeed, we join the thief in believing that Jesus has authority over paradise itself.

What remains is that we do the good the thief on the cross did not have time for. He died that awful day, with much good undone, but you and I are still alive.

Jesus has touched your hearts. I know he has. Much of the world might not care about Jesus, might even mock him, and often rejects him. But not you, for here you are in church for the Good Friday devotional. You are kin to that good thief on the Cross. But you have this great advantage over the thief: you still have time to live for Jesus. It will be good for you to do that. Aye, it will be good for you and good for our world, and will bring credit to Him who deserves credit, even Jesus Christ our Lord, whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.