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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/25/2015, Midweek Lent 1
Luke 23:43
Sermon by Theologian Gilbert Meilaender

The Second Word

“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

*What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest friend,
For this thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end? (O Sacred Head Now Wounded, LBW 117)*

That question, from one of the great Lenten hymns, should be ours today.
“what language shall I borrow / to thank thee, dearest friend?”

What is it that we can say on this Good Friday to the One whom we call Lord, but who hangs on the cross, with thorns his only crown? What can we say to express our thanks for the gift of his life that Jesus here offers us?

Perhaps we can learn something from Dysmas--the name traditionally given to the man called the “penitent thief,” who hangs on his own cross alongside Jesus.

“Remember me when you come into your kingdom,” he says. We’re so accustomed to his words that we may almost forget just how strange they are. This tough and hardened man, quite possibly a political insurrectionist, who, so far as we know, had never known Jesus or heard him, and who--even if he had ever heard Jesus--does not seem to have changed his behavior or the course of his life as a result . . . all of a sudden he says this? What was he thinking? What could he possibly have meant?

Did he really care about a Christ, a Messiah? And if he did, could he possibly have figured out that the messianic kingdom Jesus brings would not be one to overthrow Roman rule, but one that--as Jesus said to Pilate--is not a normal political kingdom of this world? If even Jesus’ closest disciples didn’t really understand this until after Jesus was raised, how can we suppose that Dysmas had it all figured out and wanted a place in that spiritual kingdom?

Perhaps a very different angle on Dysmas can give us the words we need today, the language we can borrow to express our thanks.

More than seventy years ago, in 1943, a series of twelve radio plays written by Dorothy L. Sayers was published under the title, *The Man Born to be King*. These plays had first been broadcast by the BBC in Great Britain in 1941-42. They tell the story of Jesus from birth to death and resurrection, but they tell the story with the imagination and insight that only a literary artist such as Sayers could bring.

Almost nowhere in the twelve plays is that imaginative insight more evident--or more striking--than in the way Sayers conveys the short little encounter between these two thieves, Gestas and Dysmas, and Jesus, crucified between them.

Jesus is mocked by the bystanders around the cross, and Gestas joins in. We need not pause to criticize Gestas, the man often called simply the "impenitent thief." Who can say what we would have done in his circumstances? Who knows what we might have said out of the depths of such pain and suffering?

But Dysmas was also suffering. Yet, what he does, as Sayers tells the story, is nothing short of amazing. In the midst of his own agony, he does what he can to comfort Jesus in his.

In Sayers' play it is not so much Dysmas' faith as his love that is central. He's no fool, and he thinks, as he says in the play, that Jesus must be "looney" if he imagines himself divine. But, still, he goes along with the game, trying to make Jesus feel better. You're all right, he says. This is just a bad dream, isn't it. Of course, one of these days you'll show up in a cloud of glory and astonish 'em all.

And then, wanting simply to humor--and thereby help--this poor, deluded man crucified beside him, he says very respectfully to Jesus, pretending that he speaks to a king: "Sir, you'll remember me, won't you, when you come into your kingdom?" To which Jesus makes his well-known reply that we ponder again today.

Dysmas' words are an act not so much of faith in a messianic deliverer as of concern for this man who is being mocked in his suffering. He seems to know almost instinctively what Jesus once taught: that the love shown to those who are least among us is love shown to Jesus.

Somehow, out of his own pain, Dysmas finds the strength to show to Jesus simple human kindness, which Jesus immediately recognizes as such. "Today you will be with me." That is to say, the kindness you thought you were offering to a harmless, deranged man, is really more than you know. It is kindness and love offered to the One to whom all our love must finally be directed.

Now, of course, we need not read the story in this way, in the imaginative way Sayers does. But if we do, it provides an answer to the question the hymn posed for us: What language shall I borrow, / to thank thee, dearest friend?"

We can borrow Dysmas' language, the language of love. Whatever we may be experiencing at this time in our life--whatever pain and suffering may have come our way--whatever crosses we may be given to carry--however puzzled we may sometimes be by this Jesus hanging on the cross--however hard we may find it to understand what God is doing there--we can still borrow Dysmas' language, the language of love: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." We can pray in words the hymn also gave us:

*Oh, make me thine forever,
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never*

Outlive my love to thee.

Dysmas, it seems, did not outlive his love to Jesus. And we may be sure that, when we make his words our own, Jesus will respond to us as he did to Dysmas: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”