GOOD FRIDAY + APRIL 19, 2019 + SAINT LUKE 23:33, 46

And when they had come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left. . . . And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

The accounts of Christ’s Good Friday journey along the Way of Sorrows are etched in the memories of most Christians. The details are familiar: the group of soldiers and their centurion guarding the prisoner, the sign carried in front of the prisoner indicating the reason for His punishment, “Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews,” Christ carrying His cross and falling under the weight of it, Simon of Cyrene being compelled to carry it the rest of the way to Calvary, the legend of Veronica’s veil and its image of Christ, the weeping daughters of Jerusalem and Christ’s rebuke of them. At length the party arrived at Golgotha, the place of the skull. It is only here that we are introduced to two men, malefactors, who were to be crucified with Christ. The soldiers acted swiftly. The three men were impaled on their crosses. Christ was on the central cross with a malefactor on either side. The crosses were close enough that the condemned men could talk with one another. The hours of dying began.

As we know Good Friday is the somber commemoration of the climax of the heavenly Father’s redemption drama. The plan of God to cancel the sentence of death passed upon Adam and Eve had taken thousands of years and an initial covenant with Abraham and Moses and Christ’s three year ministry to prepare for this day. Countless prophets and holy men and women had assured the chosen people that this day would arrive. And now it was here. Christ Jesus the Son of God and of the Blessed Mary has come to the hill of sacrifice. The soldiers have impaled Him on the cross, and as He had prophesied He has been lifted up that He might draw all people unto Him and grant them forgiveness and the life that would know no end.

It is heartening to note that from the time Christ first told His disciples of His coming sacrificial death He moved steadfastly toward this day. There was about Him a truly divine demeanor as He set His face toward Jerusalem and Calvary, and nothing could turn Him aside from this goal. That same demeanor continued as He looked down from the cross. Read the passion
accounts carefully, and you will discover that far from being a victim the Lord Jesus took the initiative in the Calvary events. He prayed for forgiveness for those who were crucifying Him. He meditated on Psalm 22 beginning with the words, “My God, My God why hast Thou forsaken Me,” and anticipating things that would take place on this day. He made arrangements for the welfare of both His Mother and John, the disciple whom He loved. Though He thirsted, He refused to drink the sour wine He was offered. Speaking with divine authority He declared, “It is finished,” the work He had come to do was at an end. Yes, as death approached He prayed a child’s bed time prayer, “Father, into Thy hands, I commend My spirit!”

Moving from Christ we look more closely at the two others who were impaled on their crosses. The four Evangelists all mention their presence, but none of them indicates their role in the drama of Golgotha. Christ’s presence assures us that through His sacrifice God was offering eternal life to all people. The two malefactors were certainly historic characters who had committed crimes worthy of death by crucifixion, but they are much more. Look carefully at them and listen to their words, and you will see that they are also symbols of the ways in which human beings receive God’s offer of salvation.

The malefactor on Christ’s left was unrepentant and self centered. He was not concerned about the guilt connected with his past life. He cared just as little about the people he had harmed or the two who were suffering with him. More importantly he cared nothing about God and His Law! He may well have known something about the reputation of Jesus of Nazareth, and he ranted and railed bitterly at Jesus. We can imagine his vulgar words. What the devil are you waiting for? You have a reputation of having remarkable powers. If you do, use them while there is still time. For all I care you may be a spiritual fraud, but if Your magic can save me act now. If you want to die, die alone. Don’t include me! As far as I am concerned there is nothing worth dying for.

He did not even consider God’s offer of salvation. Blind to everything but the present and his own suffering, he turned away from God’s offer of salvation. Though in the Person of Jesus, the hope of all mankind was beside him, he bowed his head and gave up the ghost as one who has no hope. This is the lot of all who are so obsessed with the present and their immediate comfort and well-being that they have no time to look to God and an eternity with Him.

The malefactor on Christ’s right was radically different. He scolded the other criminal, and reminded him that they deserved the punishment they were receiving. They had indeed committed the crimes for which they had been convicted, but Jesus had done nothing amiss. It was not merely Christ’s innocence that moved this man, he was aware of the Lord’s regal, divine
bearing. Nothing seemed to disturb Jesus’ concentration. The actions of the leading Jews and their taunts did not disturb Him. When the soldiers divided His garments among them and did not tear the outer robe, He showed no regret at having lost everything. Christ Jesus seemed to be able to rise above anything that would trouble an ordinary person. His sole concentration was on His task of redeeming mankind.

The repentant man believed that since Jesus is a King, He must have a kingdom. What else could he ask than to be remembered when the Lord entered His kingdom. His prayer was a simple one! “Lord, remember me when you enter Your kingdom.” The Lord’s answer was immediate. “Verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

The blessing was not of this world. The blessing was paradise and an eternal association with Christ the King. It was with the comfort of this promise that the penitent malefactor could face death, a death that led to eternal life. Death was not long in coming. The leaders of the Jews were anxious that the bodies should not remain on the crosses during the important Sabbath that was fast approaching. Since Jesus of Nazareth had already died, the soldiers were ordered to break the legs of the two malefactors. After their legs were broken and they could no longer support their bodies, breathing became impossible. Very quickly the repentant criminal bowed his head, gave up the ghost and died. But unlike the other, he died as one who had a sure and certain hope of paradise with his Lord.

Since the penitent malefactor is a type and shadow of all of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and see His death as a death that gives way to eternal life, the promise that was given to him has been given to all of us. Our lives may not be like his, lives of extraordinary crimes. Our sufferings may not be like his as he experienced the agony of crucifixion. But on a day of the Father’s choosing, the moment of our death will come. We shall bow our heads, give up the ghost and die. When that moment comes may the promise of our Lord Jesus sound in our ears, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” Who dies thus dies well. Amen.