

In case you haven't guessed or read your Newsletter yet, today is Christ the King Sunday. It's a 20th century development of the Christian story with a history behind it but I won't go into that today.

Who is this Jesus, the anniversary of whose birth we begin to celebrate next Sunday? Well, he's the prophet like Moses, the suffering servant of Isaiah, the Messiah of Israel, the baby in the manger, the crucified and risen one, the King of John 18, the Lord of Philippians; the agent of creation in Colossians; the mighty warrior; King of Kings and Lord of Lords of Revelation; and many, many other understandings besides. Today we've come to worship him and we'll continue to do that before we go our separate ways.

Therefore this text may seem a little strange especially when it contains a mocking gesture from the ultimate power of Jesus' day:

Luke 23:33-43

33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.'

36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.'

38 There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews.

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

43 Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you; today you will be with me in paradise.'

Our briefer text is Luke 23:42-43

In the Lord's good purposes we'll be come back to Luke next year, and when we do we'll see Jesus healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath; challenging a Pharisee about hospitality; overlooking the good, the rich, the famous and the powerful and inviting nobodies to his banquet. We'll hear Jesus speak to us through the story of the lost sons, see him commending one tax-collector and going to the home of another; and we'll note that he associated with them and other sinners.

And if we have any spiritual discernment at all, we may even wonder, where did we get it so wrong? When did Christian faith consist of being nice and safe; where did we get the idea that Christianity was about being surrounded by nice people who are like us! **That wasn't Jesus' experience.**

Here's the Lord of glory, the King of all the earth and all **he** has to converse with in his dying moments is a crook, a thief, a troublemaker, a rabble-rouser, possibly an insurrectionist. Everything points to the fact that he's not a nice boy – not the sort who would be welcome in most Christian communities.

And this non-person (in our eyes), this criminal had the audacity to say **'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'**

The man hanging there was probably thinking about tomorrow – what would become of him, where would he go? And there was Jesus with the howling mob poking fun at him, abusing him; in horrible agony for

perhaps the worst punishment that mankind had devised. In our day I think there would be some competition.

Jesus then made his request totally immediate, indeed he surprised him:

'Today you will be with me in paradise.'

What the man hanging out with Jesus thought of as future became present in Jesus' promise.

We **might** have expected Jesus to say, 'Someday, after I've gone, when God brings everything together; when God sets things right, when this horrible miscarriage of justice has been rectified, then you will be with me in my personal kingdom. Just wait until tomorrow.

NO! Jesus said, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.

Incredible, fancy linking a beautiful reality such as paradise with the horror he's going through. **BUT!** Paradise is where Jesus is, whenever, wherever you're with Jesus.

The point is, we often think of paradise as being deeper, richer and fuller (if there is such a word) - once we've passed beyond the frustrations, limitations and chaos of this life. **BUT!** That doesn't mean the relationship can't begin now. After all our practice of the Christian life is but preparation for paradise; o tell the truth, on the basis of this account of Jesus and the thief, the Christian faith is our participation now, today, in paradise.

The dying man next to Jesus didn't begin to be with Jesus in paradise once he'd drawn his last breath; the criminal began paradise when he recognised that the one who hung next to him in agony on the cross was none other than the master of this life; the Messiah. The one hanging on a cross really is the King, not only king of the Jews but Lord of all - even thieves and criminals. All hail King Jesus!

Or maybe the thief didn't yet know any of that about Jesus – his Lordship, his Kingship, his sovereignty and messianic power. All he said was, **'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'** And it was enough! **LIFE!**

Only God is the source of eternal life; nothing in us or the world is eternal.

We live, we die - end of story; we take nothing of material value, nothing of material significance with us. Therefore if we're going to have life more than this life, it must be God's life. To participate in God's life is to have eternal life; to be welcomed into God's life is to become part of God's eternal story. And only God can do this in us – this is eternal life; here, now!

However, we're not hanging on a cross; we're living in a world dominated by politics and power; and this week, it seems, mighty movements in the ground beneath us.

This brief dialogue between king and criminal, both on crosses, holds the promise that even in the worst situations of life, it's possible to be with Jesus, here, now. I mean, what could be worse than hanging on a cross?

God isn't aloof from the struggles and pain of this life. God doesn't hang out just with good and righteous persons, much and all as we think he does, our God gets mixed up in the mess of this life here on earth, even to the point of going with criminals (or us) to the cross.

We know from experience that even with our God, things can get very, very dark; but when we open our spiritual eyes we find God is there, with us; things go from bad to worse, from worse to awful and then next to us is God hanging out with us, hanging in there with us, as he was on the cross!

'Truly I tell you; today you will be with me in paradise.'

This isn't some possibility in the distant future; it's the promise of Jesus being with us here and now! TODAY!

We shouldn't then speak about life after death or the afterlife, but eternal life – with God here and now. Even in the last moments of his life, that moment when the thief saw Jesus for who he was, he experienced paradise!

So can we!

When we're forced by our following of Jesus to hang on some cross; when we're going through times of humiliation and pain because we've identified with Jesus or been identified with him, then Jesus says to us as he said to the thief,

'Today you will be with me in paradise.'

After all, didn't he say **'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.'**

We think this refers to occasions when we gather for prayer or worship. If just two or three gather in his name, he'll be there. I didn't ever think of that in relation to the dying thieves with Jesus on the cross.

His point is this: Where two or three good for nothing criminals are hanging out, like hanging on a cross, I am there!

They (and possibly we) just couldn't get the point when the people of his day railed against him for his temerity in eating and drinking with sinners. 'I've come to seek and save the lost,' he replied.

Maybe it's never occurred to us that the worst of the sinners are those (of us) who don't know their sin and the worst of the worst of sinners are those of us who don't know how lost they really are.

I'd like to conclude before we worship King Jesus through music and song by reading you an excerpt from Leo Tolstoy's testimony; the Tolstoy of War and Peace, Anna Karenina and Resurrection.

'Five years ago I came to believe in Jesus, and my life suddenly changed; I ceased to desire what I had previously desired, and began to desire what I formerly did not want. What had previously seemed to me good seemed evil, and what seemed evil seemed good.'

It happened to me as it happens to a man who goes out on some business and suddenly decides that the business is unnecessary and returns home. All that was on his right is now on his left, and all that was on his left is now on his right; his former wish to get as far as possible from home has changed into a wish to be as near as possible to it. The direction of my life and my desires became different and good and evil changed places. . . .

I, like the thief on the cross, have believed Christ's teaching and been saved. This is no far-fetched comparison, but the closest expression of the condition of spiritual despair and horror at the problem of life and death in which I lived formerly, and of the condition of peace and happiness in which I am now. I, like the thief, knew that I was unhappy and suffering. I, like the thief on the cross, was nailed by some force to a life of suffering and evil. And as, after the meaningless suffering and evils of life, the thief awaited the terrible darkness of death, so did I await the same thing.

In all this I was exactly like the thief, but the difference was that the thief was already dying, while I was still living. The thief might believe that his salvation lay there beyond the grave, but I couldn't be satisfied with that, because besides a life beyond the grave, life still awaited me here. And I didn't understand

that life. It seemed to me terrible. But suddenly I heard the words of Jesus and understood them; life and death ceased to seem evil, and instead of despair I experienced happiness and the joy of life undisturbed by death.