

Good Friday April 2nd:

The Repentant Criminal: [Luke 23:32, 39-43](#): 'today you will be with me in paradise.'



Site of the Crucifixion, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem

Crucifixion was a brutal, humiliating and very common method of execution in the Roman Empire. It served as a method of concentrating the minds of those who might be tempted to indulge in everything from common criminality to challenging the might of the Roman Empire. Crucifixions were carried out very deliberately on main roads into towns and occupied crosses were therefore very visible to all those entering and leaving.

There are three men each on a cross fighting for breath. They all know that they are soon to die. One of them has a mocking sign above his head saying, 'this is the king of the Jews'. The other two are criminals. One of them adds his own insults; default behaviour for those being crucified. The other one looks across and, right at its end, makes the most important discovery of his life. One of the very significant things that Luke wants us to know through his telling of the story is that Jesus, even as he dies the death of a criminal, is completely innocent. So it is that he includes the testimony of the centurion standing by Jesus' cross who says of him, 'Surely this was a righteous man' (Luke 23 v 47) as well as words of Jesus himself who prays from the cross for those who have been complicit in his death (Luke 23 v 34). This is a good man who is being executed and the repentant criminal can see it.

The criminal sees his own guilt against the innocence of the man hanging next to him. In doing this Luke intends him to speak for the rest of us. Jesus, the completely innocent one, dies on the cross for the sins of all of us. In a real sense we share the guilt of the criminal and so it is also to us that Jesus offers forgiveness and a place with him in paradise (v 43). Here the story of Jesus coming into the world to reconcile humanity to God reaches its defining moment.

We have seen throughout these meanderings along the Bible's back roads that human beings are actually capable of great things. As we have passed by we have noted Jonathan's selfless loyalty to his friend David, Esther's bravery and resourcefulness in a very scary situation and Joseph's thoughtful and sensitive care for Mary even when it looked like she had betrayed him. But we have also seen Cain's murderous intent, David's calculating methods of getting what he wanted and the spies' barbed questions to try and trap Jesus. We are such a mixed bag! In addition, many of the people we have considered, such as the paralysed man, the woman at the well, the widow of Nain and Bartimaeus have undergone significant transformation in one way or another.

Whilst we are capable of so much good, which does need to be celebrated, we have also failed to fulfil our vocation as those made in God's image to honour him and respond to his love because too often we don't live our lives in the way that we are meant to. Human beings have a tendency to put themselves first and far too often don't do a very good job of caring for one another; especially the lonely, the vulnerable and those in pain. The selfishness and greed of our generation mean that the beautiful planet we have been given is hurting like it has never hurt before. Too often we go into 'us and them' mode, failing to even try to understand what it is like being the other person. None of us would want to live in a world in which behaving selfishly, cruelly and thoughtlessly do not matter; a world without morality is unthinkable.

Yet God does not and cannot stop loving this world and everybody in it which is why there was an innocent man hanging alongside a guilty one offering him a place in paradise. Our representative on the cross clearly has a moral sense, which is why he recognises the innocence of Jesus. Yet things have also gone wrong in his life and he has got himself into trouble. He understands his need for redemption.

As he dies Jesus washes away the sins of humanity in a tidal wave of divine love which restores us, reconciles us to God and leads to the creation of a new heaven and earth where suffering and death will be no more. It isn't that God's anger had to be taken out on somebody so he sent Jesus to take the rap or that what Jesus did made God suddenly change his mind about us. The Christian faith is about God loving us so much that he sent his only and beloved Son to die for our sins on the cross and to rise from death to assure us that there is nothing that can separate us from the reality of that love now or in eternity.

This means that the sins of those who put Jesus on his cross; those who plotted his death, those who told lies about him, those who sentenced him to death, those who flogged and beat him, those who mocked him and those who nailed him to the cross are made as nothing such is the depth and power of his love. That is why Jesus prays for their forgiveness. By being hated and offering only love in return Jesus declares that love is infinitely more powerful than hate, light will inevitably overcome all darkness and life will triumph over death. This is why Christianity is such good news.

And it is still good news! Jesus died on the cross to wash away the sins of the repentant criminal and the rest of humanity who stand in solidarity with him in his need for forgiveness. He came to show us that God loves every one of us as we are and longs for us to be healed and whole. He came to bring into this world the kingdom of God in which there is justice, peace and goodness. He came to share an amazing hope that death is not the final act of the human story but is, in a wonderful way, only the beginning.

These are powerful truths that we are called to embrace and live out. It may be that Christianity is being pushed to the margins in our society and that secular assumptions now dictate the thinking of many. But God, in Jesus Christ, still ceaselessly addresses the world with the words 'I love you' as he always will. God has not given up on the world and he calls

us, as those who believe in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, to be witnesses to the sacred truths we share.

The repentant criminal had probably only met Jesus as they were being nailed to their respective crosses. So this was the first time they had spoken to each other. It is because there isn't much time left (Jesus dies much earlier than the soldiers were expecting) that his offer of 'paradise' is gasped out so quickly (v 43). It is a word that derives from Persian and refers to a garden, enclosure or park. It is a place where there is no suffering, where there is complete peace and tranquillity and, we would add on the basis of Jesus' offer, where we will know the his presence.

In terms of our own relationship with Jesus, perhaps we speak with him every day in our prayers, perhaps we mean to or don't quite manage to do it or perhaps we haven't, if we're being honest, spoken with him in a while. Let his words of assurance to the repentant criminal personally address you now and maybe lead to a conversation with him. Luke means all of us to hear them and know that they as true for us as for the man who died with Jesus that day.

Wherever we are in life at the moment and whatever the state of our faith Jesus never stops calling to us. He doesn't just see us as we are with all our faults and imperfections, he sees what we might be, indeed what we will be in his glory. This Good Friday let's kneel at the cross once again and ask Jesus to forgive us for the times we get it wrong. He doesn't want us to grovel in the dirt before him, he wants us to look up into his eyes and know ourselves to be set free from all that pulls us down or lies to us that we are worth nothing. The stories of the people who have appeared on the back roads of the Bible converge with our stories at the cross of Christ. Here it is that God's love for the world and for everyone who has walked its roads is made visible and changes the world.

Questions: What does the death of Jesus mean to you? What do you want to say to him today?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that you gave your life for us all. As we ask for forgiveness fill us with new life and purpose. Amen.