

Luke 23: 1-56

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Some years ago, the comic strip *The Wizard of Id* had an instalment on Good Friday. The king walks up to a church and sees the sign out front. He says to the priest, 'Let me get this straight. God comes to earth as one of us, and we kill him?' 'That's right,' says the priest. The king says, 'Your Lord is falsely accused, he's executed, there's an earthquake, your Lord is dead.' 'Right again,' says the priest. The king replies, 'What the heck is so *good* about that?' At which point the priest grins and says, 'His curtain call.'

On Good Friday, it is all too easy to jump to the curtain call. After all, we know the ultimate end of this story. But the first disciples didn't know. For them, the events we recall today were the end – the end of all their hopes, the end of their journey with Jesus, the end of Jesus himself. Death, after all, is the end ... or is it?

Today, we read Luke's description of the crucifixion. Luke includes something that none of the other gospel writers include, something easy to miss, to gloss over, especially if we jump too quickly to Sunday dawn. If we talk too soon of Sunday, we miss the words of the dying thief and so we miss Luke's great gift to the church.

Luke alone reports the conversation between Jesus and the dying thief. It's a conversation little known because it has become customary to read John's gospel on Good Friday, and John does not record these words. And even if we do read Luke, once every three years on Palm Sunday, these words are easy to miss in the midst of palms and processions. Yet they are important, significant words, for us, the church, the world, so this year, here, we read Luke's gospel today. Although we know the 'curtain call', we know today's story has an epilogue, let us leave that for Sunday, let us sit and listen to Jesus and the thief, speaking as they die.

Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution, meted out to enemies of the state, people who were seen to threaten the *pax romana*, the peace of the empire. Thieves or bandits, murderers and runaway slaves, were seen as threats to public order so were crucified as a warning to others. And, of course, any potential revolutionary was sent straight to the cross.

That's why Jesus was crucified. Many saw him as the Messiah – the one God had promised would lead the people to freedom, the son of David who would reign over a new golden age. The Romans, of course, saw any prospective Messiah as a challenge to Caesar's reign, a challenge that could not be tolerated. Irrespective of what the man said or didn't say, if he had the ability to stir up a crowd his fate was sealed.

For Jesus' followers, the sentence of crucifixion was not just a sentence of death for their leader, it was a sentence of death for their hopes in the Messiah and his kingdom. The disciples were a large group of men and women who had followed Jesus for some time and had come to believe he was the Messiah. Yet, here he was being crucified. There was no miraculous rescue by angels, no coming down from the cross. Their leader was dying, they had got it wrong, he wasn't the Messiah, there would be no liberation, no new messianic kingdom, no new life. Everything was at an end.

But the dying thief is different. He has a whole other perspective. He gets what is happening when no one else does – not Mary, Peter, John, no one. But this bandit, not a disciple, this criminal somehow understands. He makes the statement of faith that is way beyond that of any other disciple before or since.

'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

Jesus is being crucified. He is dying. The dead don't rule over anything. What possible kingdom can Jesus inherit?

The true, messianic kingdom of God.

Everyone else on that terrible day thought the Messiah would reign over an earthly kingdom, just as King David did. The thief alone understood that the Messiah's kingdom is something completely other, beyond any earthly rule, far more than a government or an empire. It is nothing less than the opening of heaven itself, the way made clear for each of us to enter the presence of God.

That phrase – the presence of God – should send shivers down the spine, should engender both awe and fear. God is holy, pure, utterly just and the essence of love. What would it mean for any of us actually to be immersed in the presence of God? I for one am not holy, not pure, often unjust and quite unloving. Being immersed in God could, I imagine, be a very painful, frightening, even soul destroying experience.

What rescues us from being utterly crushed is that God 'remembers' us – God knows who and what we are and loves us anyway. When the thief says to Jesus, 'remember me', he is recognising Jesus for who he truly is – the Son of God who accompanies us into God's holy presence without any negative consequences.

How on earth did that man get it under those circumstances? He has no knowledge of Easter Day – it hasn't happened yet! But somehow, in the midst of his own pain, his own dying, he looks at the man dying next to him and recognises the Messiah, the Son of God.

All other Christian faith comes with the insight of Easter Day. Every other Christian, from Peter and James and even the blessed virgin Mary, all of us have Easter faith, looking back at the cross from the empty tomb. The dying thief alone of us all had faith on the cross itself to look ahead and see what no one else expected. And we don't even know his name.

This man is our example, our encouragement when we look death in the face, the death of our hopes, the death of loved ones, our own death. As he died in the midst of the death of hope, he looked to Jesus, dying as he was dying, and saw beyond the grave. And as he made that most difficult of all journeys, Jesus accompanied him through death and hell to paradise, the presence of God.

The priest in *The Wizard of Id* was wrong. Good Friday is not 'good' because of the curtain call. It is good because it tells us that, when we face despair, grief, death, even hell itself, God in Jesus Christ is there, with us, opening the way to God. We are never alone because we are always remembered by God himself.

'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

Amen.