

30 March 2022

Luke 23: 26-43 Pastor Fraser Pearce

I'll start tonight with a quote from Lutheran scholar Arthur Just's Commentary on Luke, concerning the criminal on the cross:

This man's catechesis came through watching the passion of Jesus, the simple words of absolution that Jesus spoke over his enemies, and the cruel mocking of the suffering, righteous Messiah. – Just p.937

In other words, the criminal on the cross saw Jesus' innocent suffering, He *heard* Jesus' words of grace and mercy from the cross, *And he was catechised: he learnt who Jesus was.*

And from this, the criminal on the cross
Becomes the first person in the Gospel
To embrace Jesus as the one who saves others;
He makes the first announcement of Jesus' innocence by a believer,
And he calls on the name of the Lord, and is saved.

Let's listen to this part of tonight's Gospel reading,
And be encouraged by our brother in Christ,
Who in his just suffering turned to Jesus
And was saved by him.

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding [Jesus] and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

This is the culmination of the mockery of Jesus
As he is dying on the cross.

It started with those higher of higher status, the leaders:
They began the mockery: **The people stood by while *the leaders* mocked Jesus, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!**

In the kingdom of this world power is exercised
In its naked ugliness when those in comfort and ease
Declare the innocent to be worthy of death,
And mock those who believe in truth and goodness and beauty.
It is those who lead who set the tone, wo provide the words,

Who give the worldview to their underlings.
And so after the leaders of the people, the soldiers,
Those who follow orders, follow suit: **The soldiers mocked [Jesus], 'If you are he king of the Jews, save yourself'.**

They show their lack of status as they parrot those above them.
But then we reach the lowest point:

The mockery made by a criminal condemned to death
And receiving the just reward of his crime as he dies next to Jesus:
'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

But Jesus finds an ally in an unlikely place,
With the other criminal being crucified.

This is what the text says, **But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.'**

The criminals are suffering the bodily reward of their evil,
But at least one of them knows that there is someone to be feared
More than those who can kill the body,
More than death itself.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus said these words: **I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Luke 12:4-5**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom:
Recognising that no earthly power has the final say over us,
But that we are accountable to God,
This is the first step on the journey
To seeing what is before our eyes.

And for one of the criminals this means seeing
Not only the justice of their own punishment,
But also the fact that Jesus is suffering as an innocent man.

Jesus has withstood the mockery,
And he has responded mercifully and graciously,
To those who crucified him.
He has prayed, **'Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'**,

It is these actions and words from the cross
That open the man's eyes to see that Jesus belongs
To a different order of existence:
That Jesus has a kingdom not of this world,
Where death reigns as king,
But that he has a kingdom where there is life with God,
And where God's justice and mercy reign.

And this leads the man to call out to Jesus
Whose name means 'The Lord saves'.
It leads him to call on Jesus by name in faith,
He said, **'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'**
This language is reminiscent of Psalm 25,
Where we read these words:

**Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.**

**Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!** Psalm 25

This same prayer, addressed to the Lord God in the psalm,
Is now addressed by the condemned criminal *to Jesus*
To the one who in his innocent suffering and death
Shows us who God is, and how God deals with those
Who turn to him in trust,
No matter how unworthy they may be
According to the measure of strict justice.

And so Jesus says to the man, **'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'**

This word 'paradise' is rarely used in the Bible.

In fact, this is the only time that it is used in the Gospels.
As we hear the word, we are reminded of that garden
Where God placed our first parents in the days of their innocence,
Before they fell into sin.

Because of sin, our first parents, and we following them,
Have been excluded from paradise.

This is what we read in Genesis 3: **Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’— therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.**

But in today’s reading we hear of the way back to our true home,
A way back to where we as human beings can live in innocence
Rather than under the condemnation that is part
Of the kingdom of this world.

The true paradise is where Jesus is,
The one who suffered as an innocent man,
The one who did not repay mockery with mockery,
But who prayed for those who persecuted him.
With Jesus, who went to the cross to provide a ransom for many,
With *him* is paradise,
Is our restoration as human beings to live
In the life-giving presence of God.

Let’s thank God for our brother,
The criminal on the cross,
Who gave us an example of faith in Jesus.
And let us with him call out on Jesus to remember us,
Since he lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. Amen!