

Wednesday of Reminiscere

The Seven Last Words - "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Luke 23:39-43

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Much can be and has been said of the second of Jesus' seven last words. "Today you will be with me in Paradise." The focus is almost always on the word "Paradise." The penitent criminal acknowledges Jesus for who He is, an innocent man and the Lord, and begs to be remembered when He comes into His kingdom. Jesus speaks the second of His seven last words, and the masses think that Jesus told the criminal that he would be in heaven that day.

Paradise is rightly equated with Eden. Eden, that garden of ancient times wherein the first man was placed to live and to tend, is said by some to have a name that is related to the Greek root hedonism. At the core, hedonism is the teaching that pleasure or happiness is the highest good, and, by extension, this pleasure or happiness is enhanced by a lack of clothing, much like Adam and Eve were in the Garden naked and not ashamed. There, in Eden, Adam and Eve lived in perfect bliss and harmony with God and all of creation. Eden was, for all intents and purposes, a God-made and planted paradise.

That was, of course, until the fall into sin. They were expelled from Paradise. The way back in was blocked. The life they lived on the outside was anything but paradisaical. The harmony with God and creation was destroyed. Death reigned, and Adam and Eve eventually returned to the dust from which he was taken. And for generations since, mankind has only been able to dream about paradise—see it only, as it were, in a mirror dimly. (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12)

That dream—that dim vision—is exemplified in heaven. Streets paved with gold. Land flowing freely with milk and honey. Bread made with the best wheat. A feast that has no end. And if you're picturing any of that, you aren't getting the half of it! Heaven sounds like Paradise, and it is. There, the order of creation will be restored, and those who are granted entrance will live forever in harmony once again with God and the rest of creation.

It's just that sin gets in the way. Oh, you have a part in it, too. That is because apart from the work of God in Christ, your sins cannot be separated from you. You are your sins and your sins are you. And that work in Christ is what you are hearing about tonight, and these next few Wednesday nights, as He hangs on the cross and speaks His seven last words. There, as Jesus hung dying, He had assumed all sins and sinfulness into His own flesh: those of Adam and Eve from that moment in Eden; those of the executioners who nailed Him to the cross; those of the repentant criminal crucified next to Him; those of the other criminal who thinks only to mock Him on the other cross beside Him; those of the crowds gathered around His cross to witness His crucifixion, who either mourned or jeered; in fact, those of the world 'round (cf. John 1:29), including yours, dear hearers. Jesus has separated you from your sins, and flung open the gates of Paradise to you.

The repentant criminal prays, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom." He seeks mercy from the only One who can grant him mercy. The Roman guards won't do it. The Roman government and its representatives won't do it. The Jews gathered around won't do it. And, in fact, none of them can do it. Jesus, only Jesus, is able to wipe that stain away, as He takes it into Himself. The repentant criminal acknowledges that as He calls Jesus, "Lord," and seeks entrance into His kingdom.

And Jesus speaks His second word. "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." This second word is spoken on the heels of His first: "Father, forgive them...." (Luke 23:34) It is spoken on the heels of the jeers that taunted Him, ironically, speaking the truth, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God...If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." (Luke 23:35, 37) Jesus is the King of the Jews who saves others, at His own expense and for His

own sake. He wins for them forgiveness as He dies for the sins of the world. And, after asking for the forgiveness of those blinded to their own misdeeds, He grants forgiveness to the one who seeks mercy from Him.

"Jesus, pitying the sighs / Of the thief who near Thee dies, / Promising him Paradise: / Hear us, holy Jesus."

But is Jesus telling the repentant criminal that he would be in heaven later that day? That's a difficult question to answer, simply because on this side of eternity, you are not given to understand how God works in and outside of time. It certainly sounds like it, and it is a pleasant thought that one who has been forgiven by Jesus will be in heaven upon death. However, St. Paul was given to write that on the last day, the dead will rise at the trumpet blast and be changed by putting on incorruption, indicating that this change and incorruption does not happen after death, but after the resurrection. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:51-54) Furthermore, as you heard earlier this evening, he wrote to the Thessalonians that at the trumpet on the last day, the dead will rise and that they together with those who are alive at the time will ascend to meet Jesus in the clouds, and thus always be with the Lord. (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

No, the best that can be said is that those who have gone before with the sign of faith are with Jesus. These are some easily overlooked words in Jesus' promise to the repentant criminal. "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me..."

It is beautiful, incarnational language, too. Some thirty-three years earlier, the angel visited a lowly maiden in Nazareth and proclaimed, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is *with you*...." (Luke 1:28, emphasis added) With those words, the incarnation of the Son of God was announced to Mary, and with the same words, Jesus tells the thief that he is flesh-and-blood with Him. Even in this promise of forgiveness and eternity, the incarnation has a place. For without that flesh and blood of Jesus, the promise to be with Him in paradise would be empty and void, lacking substance in a very literal sense.

The repentant criminal, Adam and Eve, our believing deceased relatives, all of the dead in Christ are all together *with Christ*—they are forever in Christ, held in His incarnate, nail-pierced hands, from where no one is able to snatch them. Therefore, we who are alive now and await our own deaths or Jesus' return, look forward to that great day and the trumpet blast and a joyful reunion and eternity in Paradise. There is no greater hope, for this is what has been promised to you.

"May our hearts to Thee incline, / Looking from our cross to Thine, / Cheer our souls with hope divine: / Hear us, holy Jesus."

But, dear hearers, do not fret. You are in Paradise even as I speak. It's why the promise of life eternal at the Feast that has no end is the hope for all of those who are still alive and in Christ.

"May we in our guilt and shame / Still Thy love and mercy claim, / Calling humbly on Thy name: / Hear us, holy Jesus."

You are gathered here week in and week out, where you are given words by which you call humbly on Jesus' name as you seek to claim His mercy and grace. For the truth is as the repentant criminal declared: Jesus is innocent of crimes, but you justly deserve to be on the cross where He died. Therefore, you cry out to Jesus as did the repentant thief, "Lord, remember me in Your kingdom." It sounds a little more like, "I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities." You confess that you have put Jesus on the cross for all of your iniquity. But through His mouthpiece, Jesus replies, "Assuredly, I say to you, you are with me in Paradise." "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Yes, you deserve to be where Jesus is, but Jesus is there so that you can be where He is now—in eternal life...in Paradise. And assuredly enough, that's exactly where He places you with those words.

Yes, for now, while you live in this fallen world, struggling against your fallen flesh, where chaos and death reign, you see it only in that mirror dimly, but it is most certainly yours, to be fully realized and lived in “not yet.” You have eternal life, even though this life of yours may yet end, spare Jesus’ return; and even if He were to return before you die, this life—this fallen life of illness, injury, and chaos—will most certainly be over. On that great day, you will be ushered into the eternal, visible presence of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But do not be dismayed, since you are in Christ, you are most certainly in His real presence—you are with Christ in Paradise—even now!

For the time being, you need to be reminded of this, which is why the words of Holy Absolution are spoken to you. These words return you to the promises of your baptism daily as they give you exactly what you say, the forgiveness of your sins. In so doing, they strengthen the faith that you have been given in Holy Baptism and comfort and help you against sin and every temptation. They remind you of your joining to Christ.

From the cross, Jesus told the penitent criminal that he would be *with Him*. In that moment, the criminal was joined to Jesus, and in a very real sense, he joined Jesus in a death like His as they were both nailed to crosses on a hill called Skull. The criminal may not have had the privilege to share in Jesus’ death by way of baptism with water, but he was certainly being baptized in the same fire as Jesus, even as John the Baptist promised would happen. (cf. Luke 3:16)

You, however, dear hearer, Jesus told that you would be *with Him* at the font. There, you had the privilege to receive Jesus and be joined with Him in a death like His in a baptism with water. (cf. Romans 6:3-5) This baptism—Holy Baptism—has eternal consequences:

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:5-11)

You were joined to Jesus death in baptism. At the font, you died to sin and rose to newness of life. You were ushered into Paradise through that blessed flood. Now, in Christ, you daily are reminded of the time and give the same gift given then: the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.