

JESUS & A CRIMINAL

Nobody is ever really ready for Jesus. He has too many dimensions and comes with too many surprises. And no matter how many creeds we write or how many churches we build, when Jesus comes it blows it all into particles of light. All we can do is look at the story again, open our hearts, and trust Him. When was the last time we really *heard* the Gospel?

The passage we read from the twenty-third chapter of Luke illustrates the Gospel in all of its depths and heights. At least it does for me. There is no Easter without Good Friday. While that is a truism, we do try to avoid our own experiences of crucifixion with earnest and heartfelt intensity. A high percentage of our prayers are involved in some way with our hopes and pleas that we may escape the painful, the sorrowful, the negative dimensions of life – and that we might help others do the same. We must hasten to add that in large measure, this is right and appropriate. It is better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick. I don't know why so many humans have a hard time figuring this out. Life and success are better than failure and death. Jesus was praying for this in the Garden too. Abundant Life was clearly the theme of His teaching and preaching and healing, but that is not the whole story.

There is something dreadfully wrong here. Our Puritan ancestors called it “depravity.” It killed the dream of a *New* England that would be a righteous and holy *New* Israel. More often, it is called “sin” – alienation from God. Why do even our best labors keep ending in animosity, loneliness, separation, fear, despair? Even health and wealth and success can be ruined by sin. We have a nation full of people blessed beyond the wildest imaginations of any of our forebears, and still the vast majority of us are miserable. Something is dreadfully wrong here.

Slowly we discover that there is a deeper dimension to life that only comes through *dying*. And there are lots of little deaths – not just the big one at the end. Transforming moments come most often out of the depths. A confidence based on optimism is like a pile of leaves in a high wind. Anybody can be brave and noble when they are winning. Jesus trusted the God of LIFE so completely that He did not run from failure or death. He had a confidence nothing in this world could shake. That is what makes Him so remarkable. That is why I like Jesus better

than Robert Schuller, Norman Vincent Peale, or any of the gurus who say that if you just think positively, everything will turn out fine. Jesus thought just fine, and everything kept getting worse, as far as this world can measure or reward things.

I do not like foundations that crumble, especially when we need them the most. I like faith that stands as strong in the great storms as it does in the sunshine. For this reason, in times past, some people have called *me* negative, or too serious. On the other hand, it makes me really joyful to know that our Faith is not going to crumble under adversity – that it is not afraid of anything: not death, not Satan, not Hell itself. I do not like a Christianity based on earthly success – cheering and shouting and everybody thinking that the victory is won and it is all over, when it is really only barely begun. You do know Palm Sunday don't you? Jesus is the only one weeping, if we notice. I am always asking: What does it take to make the Son of God cry? It only happens twice that I know of. Even the Garden of Gethsemane did not do it. But Palm Sunday did. He knows it is just fluff and feathers. He is still waiting for a truer victory – God's kind – one deep in the heart and soul. A few days later, the veil is rent, and the boundaries of life tear open to reveal endless new dimensions. I like that kind of negative: Christianity built on Good Friday and Easter – not on Palm Sunday. *That* kind does not shake apart in *any* storm.

People who come to Easter without coming through Good Friday are celebrating Palm Sunday. It doesn't matter what the calendar says. It doesn't matter what the sermon or the Scripture or the hymns or the anthems are proclaiming. People who come to Easter without coming through Good Friday are celebrating Palm Sunday. You can tell a story by its ending. Just as you can tell what story people believe in by the way they live.

Today's story takes place on a dark and horrid day, in the midst of life's worst negatives – defeat and pain and death. Some say it is the worst day in the history of the world. Three men hang dying on crosses.

The focus of the story today is mostly on one of the men next to Jesus. Tradition has assigned to him the name of Dismas (or Dumachus). We do not really know his name. We do not know what crime has brought him to this place. We know only that he is a criminal – a lawbreaker. That he is being killed because Rome has decided that he is guilty. Yet his story is astounding. And out of this dark moment comes some of the brightest light in all the world.

Some people assume that this light has always been known, and that they just did not know where it came from. But they are mistaken. This light comes from God, via Jesus, and most of the world does not know this light even yet.

The great benefit of this story is its clarity and simplicity. It is not true that Jesus is a simple peasant teacher. His parables dazzle and confound us. His teachings overwhelm and often stun us. We have been arguing over it all for two thousand years, and still we often end up having to take our best guess and trust to His mercy. But in this story, Jesus is in too much pain and is too short of breath to say more than what is absolutely necessary. All we get is pure, distilled Gospel. The incident is so clear, in fact, that people never talk about it for very long without trying to complicate and confuse it. Doubtless I will do so myself, and I'm sorry. Part of the drama is precisely here – that it cuts across and defies our ordinary views and convictions about life and truth. So we must struggle to keep the clarity and to hang on to the climax of the story through all the extraneous comments and considerations.

Dismas, as we shall call him, went to Heaven – to Paradise – with Jesus. That is what the story says. And that does it! That blows everything! Morality as the basis for our acceptance ends. All our creeds crumble; the fabric of the Law is torn to shreds; the formulas and rules of most churches are confounded. But even as our notions of the way life works disintegrate, our HOPE comes marching forth like a Colossus: *God's* love has nothing to do with how well *we* do. The Gospel is not about how loving or good or right *we* are. It is about how loving *God* is! Dismas, who was crucified beside Jesus, was promised that he would be in Paradise with Jesus before the sun set on that very day. Among all the astounding characters we meet in the New Testament, aside from Jesus Himself, Dismas is the only one we know for sure made it into Heaven. In one sense, you cannot have a more successful life than to make it from this realm into Paradise with God. And this criminal, who died beside Jesus, made it.

All of us have been told and taught that there are certain requirements, certain steps we have to take, if we want salvation – if we want to be “saved,” if we want to be acceptable to God, if we want to make it into Heaven. But Dismas, in the true grace of Jesus the Christ, reminds us that they are all human constructs; that they are all false requirements; that they are all invented by institutional religion – not by the mercy or love of Almighty God. By the way, some

of these steps may be helpful or useful to those of us who desire to walk the Christian Path – to those who truly wish to grow and develop in spiritual realities. But none of them are requirements. Shall we do the countdown together?

To truly comprehend the grace of our Lord, it is necessary to remember that Dismas was not a disciple. He never took communion. He never received baptism. He never joined a church. He never confessed his faith, or turned his life over to Jesus. He never recited the Apostle's Creed. He never sold all that he had and gave it to the poor. He did not tithe, pray every day, or study the Scriptures diligently. He never read the New Testament (which would not exist for another two hundred and fifty years). He broke many, if not all, of the Ten Commandments. Never, so far as the story goes, did Dismas labor to improve his community, raise a family, or devote himself to serving his neighbors. Not only did he fail to do these things, but he made it harder for others who were *trying* to do these things. His life was clearly a minus. He was at the end of his life, and he was dying as a convicted criminal. Yet Dismas made it from this life into eternal life with God.

The secret of his success, the great achievement of his life, the heroic deed for which he received this incredible prize – what was it? It was one simple statement from his heart: *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

It does make it clear that Jesus came to save sinners – not the righteous. It does make it clear that Jesus came to *save* us – not just to adjust us, educate us, mature us, entertain us, or edify us on how to get along comfortably and effectively here on earth. He did not come to improve conditions on this planet. He came to retrieve human souls from Satan's bondage, reconcile us to God, and take us home. Of course, if enough of us believed in Him and did indeed receive His grace, inevitably it would improve things on this planet – and doubtless does to some degree already. But that is a side effect – not the main purpose.

It does make it clear that we are saved by faith alone, and not by anything we produce or do or attempt to do. Dismas comes empty-handed, without a single claim to his name, without any shred of deserving. He comes with nothing but the dim awareness of God's existence – and the longing for some connection with God, even if only as a memory in the mind of God's Messiah.

It does make it clear that when true faith comes, Life comes with it. The power of resurrection is swifter than the Angel of Death. *“This day you will be with me in paradise.”*

Eternal life is a *quality of LIFE*, not a point in space or time. Eternal life begins at the moment we come to trust God’s love. Judgment Day is a day many of us have already experienced – more than once (especially those of us who are married). Death is a thing that comes in many forms, and we have already passed through it in more ways than most of us like to admit. The physical death that still awaits us may turn out to be far less difficult than some of the spiritual and psychological deaths from which Christ has already rescued us.

Any way you look at it, the story of Dismas cuts through heaps of fear and hopelessness and nonsense. The Kingdom of Christ is revealed as the destiny available to anyone, at any time, who has humble faith enough to give life over to God. That is the meaning of the Cross without all the “ifs” and “ands” and “buts” and explanations, and without asking what is implied or required or promised from there. It is a stumbling block to Jews, says Paul, because they feel that people must earn their right to Heaven by meeting the demands of justice and showing themselves worthy. It is foolishness to Greeks, says Paul, because it is too simple – it does not require enough education, enough intellectual searching and understanding, enough wisdom or maturity. It is also anathema to the Muslim; eternal punishment to the Hindu; laziness to the Buddhist; wishful thinking to the atheist; irrelevance to the humanist. But to the Christian, it is the power and love and presence of Almighty God. And in this awareness, true LIFE begins for us.

Let us take a closer look at Dismas. The offense of the Gospel is revealed by the many efforts that have been made to “clean up” his story. Perhaps he was a kind of Robin Hood, and Jesus knew he had tried really hard to lead a good life in his own way. Or maybe he had been baptized by John the Baptist at an earlier time, and the sacrament was only now taking effect. One of the weirdest ones is that maybe he was a childhood friend of Jesus and had done Jesus a big favor. The favorite explanation is that he was a Jewish patriot (zealot) whose only crime was against the hated tyranny of Rome, and he was only in trouble because he had loved his nation too brashly and too well. I have heard or read these and many other explanations, and they go on and on.

But try as we might to whitewash Dismas, it always washes off. He himself ruined all our efforts on his behalf. He confessed that his sentence was just. He himself stated that he was receiving a fair and proper reward for his deeds. No Robin Hood or patriot talks like that. So far as Dismas himself was concerned, whatever his life had been, he *deserved* to be crucified. There ends our human understanding. Dismas fixed it so that we could not turn him into a “good guy.” Why couldn’t he have just kept his big mouth shut?! No longer can we claim that we get to Heaven for being good guys, or that we have any advantage with God over the bad guys. All we have is the certain knowledge that Dismas was a *bad* guy, and that he went to Heaven.

Of course, no person is totally bad. Whatever evil deeds Dismas had done, we can note positive qualities in him. He was COMPASSIONATE. There was emotion in him which, despite his own predicament, came forth to sympathize with and object to the unjust fate of the man who hung on a cross beside him.

Dismas was also, in some way, a RELIGIOUS MAN. He feared God in the face of death, even though he had failed to fear God (or had postponed it) during his life. It even surprised him that the other criminal could be so disrespectful toward Jesus at such a time. After all, there was no further reason to pretend anything.

Dismas was also HONEST about his own life – finally – and revealed his inner conscience. We cannot say that he was repentant, because that means turning to do deeds of penance in the hope of correcting some of the damage. Dismas had no such option; he had no time or opportunity to make amends. The only thing worse than having to do penance is not being *able* to do penance. In any case, Dismas had stopped making excuses, and he was willing to own up to his fate as one well-deserved. That is a brand of honesty one rarely finds, even among the good guys.

It also seems true that Dismas was still capable of RECOGNIZING GOODNESS AND TRUTH when he saw it. Certainly he seems to have realized that Jesus was different. Who knows what he saw or felt, watching Jesus during that day. Yet somehow Dismas sensed that there had to be a power and a kingdom behind a man so strangely different. Such a man could not just drop out of nowhere.

And how do we describe the SOUL-HUNGER that Dismas revealed? He was not being cynical or hard-bitten about anything anymore. As far as he was concerned, he had flunked out, he was

getting expelled, he was about to die. Nevertheless, he believed that there was another possibility. Not for him, not anymore, because he had failed and it was too late. But there was another side to life. Though he had missed it, it was still some comfort to him to realize that it was real and that Jesus represented it. Life did not have to be so empty for others. And somehow, he longed to touch that other side of life, even if only for a moment. *“Jesus, remember me.”*

I cannot see this as a request or an expectation for the amazing promise that followed. Jesus’ reply could not have been anticipated. The mere possibility was so unheard of, so bizarre, that most of Christendom has not absorbed or believed it even yet. Clearly, Jesus’ response was astounding to Dismas. He held no hope for himself, but only asked to be remembered. “I know that this is not the end of the story for you,” he seems to be saying. “When you come into your kingdom, remember the one who failed. I’m through, but if it isn’t asking too much, hold a thought for me in your memory.”

Nothing else, really, except his sheer awareness of and longing for something that would now never come true. Sheer thought and emotion, without evidence or deed to give them meaning. A simple desire for being what he never could be now ... the faint wish that it could have been otherwise ... the hope that even this small a desire for goodness might be recorded of him. *“Jesus, remember me.”*

But Dismas did not know the grace and power of God. That’s why he is so important to us. His winsome despair was also a prayer, and it carried with it, in that moment, the seed of a perfect faith. In the incomprehensible mystery of the love of God and the love of Christ, that is all it takes. That is enough to work with. That is all God asks for or looks for from any person – to begin with: One honest, no-excuses, no-proud-promises prayer. A true hunger for connection. It does not matter how late it is, how inconsistent it is, or how impossible it now is to back it up with deeds. They can always come later, if the heart is right. All God needs or asks from any of us, in the beginning, is the desire for connection – the willingness for relationship to begin. *“This day you will be with me in paradise.”*

Only, we won’t have it! We insist on making it difficult and complicated. We insist on the privilege of pointing with pride to the remodeling we have done on ourselves. We demand that God judge us by our works and accomplishments, and we refuse to leave off judging others by theirs. We still think we are going to take our slightly enlarged

high-school yearbooks to the Pearly Gates, show them all the organizations we have belonged to, all the things we have achieved, and all the good deeds we have done, and that will *make* them let us in.

The last thing in the world that sounds fair or right to us is some God who loves us and saves us even if we do not deserve it. Such a God might even save other people who we are very *certain* do not deserve it. What could be more annoying than *that*? And so we live our lives forever in the Twilight Zone between the pride of our deserving and the humility of knowing that apart from grace, all are lost.

Classically, there are two reactions to the story of Dismas. One is irritation beyond expression. It means that all the people we have tried to help, all the good deeds we have done, all the money we have given or loaned, all the self-sacrifices we have made, all the good causes we have defended – all the things we have done to convince ourselves, with God watching, that we are the right kind of people – by themselves, none of them mean a blessed thing. Either we did them for the sheer joy of it – to express gratitude for love already received – or it was simply a charade. Genuine “good deeds” do not precede salvation – they follow it.

What can I do that will entitle me to be loved forever? What can you do to guarantee your right to be loved by another? Even on our low level, do we find ourselves loving other people in rank and order according to how much they have done for us? It simply does not work that way, does it? Why do we think it should work that way with God? Maybe at times our efforts can get us hired or elected, but what can we do to get ourselves *loved*? And especially, how can we get ourselves loved by the transcendent, numinous, omnipotent God?

Sometimes in moments of deep honesty, we find ourselves bereft of our white chargers and stripped of our Galahad armor. And we then know what it was like for poor Dismas on that strange, incredible day. Without a claim to our name, without a single deed or merit or achievement that could impress the Higher Courts or the God of Truth, it comes clear that only a LOVE which loves us beyond any fact or precept this world can fathom could care one whit whether we live or die. In such awareness, we do sometimes cease feeling irritation or bitterness toward the undeserved good fortune of Dismas, or any other human being on earth, and we kneel in our own moment of truth, praying “*Jesus, remember me.*”

God already loves you because of what God is like. That is the Gospel. That day on Golgotha, God's heart was breaking and longing for Dismas too. One chink in the armor of pride and separation is all God needs. *Jesus, remember me.* "Come home, my son." Only, we do not often hear it very clearly from God – especially not through our pain and shame and confusion. But Jesus hears it, and translates it for us. And so, the reply: *"This day you will be with me in paradise."*