

September 15, 2024 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

“You will be with me in paradise” by Pastor Julio Romero

Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

This morning, I want to take you back to Good Friday and read the short conversation of Jesus and the two criminals that were crucified next to him.

This is how it is written in the Gospel of Luke the 23rd Chapter:

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?

⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. ”

⁴³Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Let’s focus our attention on the criminals for a moment. The Lord Jesus in the Gospel this morning says *“³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”*

The two criminals crucified next to Jesus had literally lost their lives. They were about to die on the cross, they both knew that the sun was not going to rise for them again. Nobody knows what their crimes were or what they were accused of to deserve such punishment.

What we know is that their lives were lost even before they lost them on the cross. One of them was aware of it. He is the one who admitted his transgressions, who made peace with his sentence. Listen one more time to what he said: *“⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve”* . That is what he said.

Perhaps there was a time when through their criminal activities they thought they were gaining the whole world but what they were actually doing was forfeiting their lives, losing their lives.

You would think that there would be no hope for someone like them, especially at the moment of their crucifixion, at the moment of no return, and one of them knew it, and all he could say was “*Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom*”.

What happened next gave to this man something he thought had lost forever, the gift of a new life, the gift of being welcome as a child of God, the gift of being welcome back into God’s Kingdom.

⁴³*Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

It would be impossible to imagine what those words from Jesus meant to that man. He thought that because of his actions, he had been excluded from God’s love, God’s grace, forgiveness and paradise. Probably in his mind at that point the next place for him, if there was one, was only darkness, emptiness, and eternal suffering.

“Today you will be with me in paradise” the Lord said.

To have an idea of what that meant for the criminal crucified next to Jesus, I am going to tell you what the image of paradise meant for the Jewish people.

It is believed that the image of “paradise” originates from the Persian language which means a beautiful garden, but the ideal paradise is the king’s garden. In ancient times kings had beautiful gardens with exotic animals you wouldn’t see in that part of the world. The garden had flowing water and trees and was a place of serenity or peace. And when someone had done something heroic, they were invited to the king’s garden.

When Jesus speaks of paradise, He gives us an image of heaven. It’s not something hard and sterile like streets of gold or pearly gates. Jesus says heaven is paradise, the king’s garden, a place of beauty, peace and rest. And even more than that, it brings to mind the very first garden in the Bible, the garden of Eden, where God would come in the cool of the day and walk with Adam and Eve who enjoyed being in the presence of God, their Creator.

Knowing this, can you just imagine what the words from Jesus meant to that man? He had not done anything heroic. On the contrary, the things he had done were things that made him feel ashamed of himself, but it is this man to whom the Lord Jesus is

making the invitation to walk with God again. He was going to enjoy God's presence, enjoy the beauty, the rest and the peace that he denied to himself or was denied to him in this world, he was going to have life and have it abundantly in ways he could not even imagine.

It sounds like too much of a reward for someone who doesn't deserve it, we might say, but truly, do any of us deserve such a reward?

How many of us have looked at ourselves as someone who, because of our actions, has excluded himself or herself from God's paradise; as someone who in our own ambitions, wrong choices or transgressions in trying to gain the whole world have lost our life; as someone who doesn't deserve eternal peace, eternal rest and walk with God, or to enjoy His presence and the beauty of His Kingdom?

Well, it is to you and to me, ordinary people who have not even come close to doing something heroic to deserve such invitation, that Jesus is saying "*You will be with me in paradise*".

This is what sets Christianity apart from other religions. Christianity is all about God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's love, and about life, abundant life.

We believe that there is nothing we can do or not do that will make us earn God's mercy, God's salvation. Salvation is a gift and not even our faith is the work of our own doing. Faith in our Lord Jesus is a gift too. However, there is a road for us to walk on, there is a Gospel to follow, there is someone to be faithful to and believe in, and that is our Lord Jesus. He is the way, the truth and the life and whoever believes in Him even though they die, will live. Life won't be lost, it will be gained and saved in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. *Amen.*

