Christ the King Sunday

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Christ the King Sunday C – Jrm 23 1-6, Ps 46, Col 1 11-20, Lk 23 33-34

Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom – Today you will be with me in paradise. That second criminal talks of Jesus' Kingdom as though it's somewhere in the future, but Jesus says it's *today*. They'll be there *today*. There are two other times such *today*s occur in Luke. And as we farewell this gospel for three years, I'll remind you of them. The first is at the launch of Jesus' public ministry – Luke 4. He goes to Synagogue in Nazareth, and the attendant gives him the scroll to do one of the readings. It's the Isaiah scroll, and he reads this passage from it.

*18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he's anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He's sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

This is the ***today*** that Jesus offers the criminal who's on a cross next to him: release from captivity, recovery of sight; liberation from oppression; God's favour – ***today****!*

The other time this *today* word comes up is in a story we know very well in Luke 19. Jesus looks at the tax collector Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree and says *hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house* ***today.*** And shortly afterwards, when it's clear to everyone that Zacchaeus's

heart's been released from greed for service to the poor, Jesus tells him, ***today*** *salvation has come to this house*.

This change of direction – this turning from a former way of living to face Jesus – is what happened in the heart of that second criminal crucified with him. He replies to the taunts of the other criminal, saying *We've been condemned justly, … we're getting what we deserve for our deeds…' And then he turns to Jesus to ask him, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'*

What we see here is the complete transformation of a human soul from criminal to saint. He names what he has been, renounces it and turns to Jesus. He calls on Jesus' name and asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom. And Jesus receives him immediately – takes him at his word and receives him. ***Today*** you will be with me in paradise; restored to the fulness of life. ***There****, on a* ***cross****?!* Cynical people mock gallows repentance. But Jesus sees the truth in our hearts.

This is an astonishing scene. The people Jesus keeps company with here – and habitually – show that none of us should ever imagine ourselves beyond the reach of Jesus' love – none of us should ever imagine ourselves beneath Jesus notice.

In pastoral ministry, I've often come into contact with people whose mental state is so sad that they're convinced they've been forgotten by God, or locked out of God's love. These people have often exhausted the resources of their families and friends too. Their cyclical bouts of depression or recurrent, chronic illness have led them and their supporters to lose hope. I'm constantly shocked by the terrible burdens so many people carry in life. So many people on the cross.

If you're on the cross yourself, the suffering is often made worse by feeling that you're cut off from *everybody*. You're stuck with your pain while everyone else seems to be free to

go about their lives. When I find someone is in that sort of pain – their pain made much worse by feeling isolated – I know the only one who can help is someone who knows the same feeling: who knows what it is to be on the Cross. I want them to be able to look beside them, and there, on a friendly neighbouring cross, meet the one who is always with them; whose love can bring them healing and wholeness.

So, often, I'll talk with them about today's scene in Luke's gospel. We can wonder together what it meant to that second criminal who turned to Jesus – what it meant that he turned to someone who knew what their pain and despair felt like; if that criminal couldn't have turned until that moment. And if he'd not been welcomed there and then, would he have sunk back into despair at his helpless, tortured state? Could he have done so sooner?

There are things we need to draw from this scene. Things about our discipleship to Christ the King – about our imitation of his example, and our role as his body on Earth now. Can people turn to us as that second criminal could turn to him? Do we have to be in pain before we can be of any use to others who suffer? There's certainly something to be said for the Christian who is a wounded healer; one who can honestly say I understand someone else's pain.

But Jesus didn't go looking for pain. Someone else inflicted that on him. If we want to follow Jesus, we don't measure our success by how much pain it costs us. We measure it by the choices we make: by our hospitality, our kindness, our commitment to the poor, to the captive – and to overcoming spiritual blindness – things that make us vulnerable and present to others whose pain isolates them . But whatever we do, whoever we are, it's about being that person today – doing it *today.*

There's a plaque on the entrance to the Epworth building in Pirie Street. It says, *I expect to pass through this world but*

once, any good therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now, let me not defer it, nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.

Let's do it now; TODAY!

And yet, is *doing* something the point? That second criminal was utterly incapable of *doing anything*. But Jesus wasn't fussed by that. The acceptance – the welcome – the love – they had no other condition required than a wish – a need to receive them.

We're called to open *our* hearts to the awesome majesty of the one in whom *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*, and who, at the same time, is utterly committed to us – reconciling all things to God in selfless love – *by making peace through the blood of his cross*.

It gives our imaginations whiplash to contemplate such contrasting extremes. But for today, when we know we can turn to him and ask him, '*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,*' please know that we can do it – **today**. Amen