Today you will be with me in paradise

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Christ the King Sunday Year C: Jer 23.1-6, Lk 1. 68-79, Col 1. 11-20, Lk 23. 33-43

'Jesus, remember me **when** you come into your Kingdom'

That second criminal's prayer sounds as if Jesus' Kingdom is in the future. *'Jesus, remember me **when** you come into your Kingdom'*. But Jesus tells him it's *today*. *'Truly I tell you, **today** you **will be** with me in paradise'*. He and Jesus will both be in paradise *today*. The New Testament speaks of a life after death with Jesus in two different ways; one is immediate, as we read today, and the other is in the future; death will be a time of sleep before the second coming and the general resurrection. *eg 1 Cor 15.17-20* The New Testament speaks similarly of God's Kingdom as coming with the coming of Jesus, eg in the preaching of John the Baptist in Luke 3, and as here and now. eg Lk 17.20-21 On Christ the King Sunday, the emphasis is God's Kingdom here and now; Christ is with us, so the Kingdom is too. ***Today** you'll be with me in paradise.*

Over the past year, there were two other times we heard the word *today* in Luke's Gospel. Let me remind you of them.

The first was the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry in Luke 4. He went to synagogue in Nazareth, and the attendant gave him the scroll so he could read out one of the scripture lessons. He was given the Isaiah scroll. He chose a few verses to read out from it, (Isa 61.1, 2 & 58) then he stood and read them out.

[18]“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has 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] [Then] he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down [to preach]. 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.”*

Today!

This release from captivity, recovery of sight, freedom from oppression, and God’s favour is precisely what we just heard Jesus offer the criminal who was crucified with him: ***Today*** *you’ll be with me in paradise!* The crucified criminal only asked to be remembered by Jesus, but Jesus gave him citizenship in the Kingdom of God. If only secular sovereign rule were so gracious!

The only other time this *today* word comes up in Luke’s Gospel is in a story we heard three weeks ago in Lk 19: Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree and said *‘…hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house **today**…’* And when he saw how Zacchaeus’ heart was released for service to the poor, *‘…Jesus said to him, “**Today** salvation has come to this house.”…’*

This change of life-direction – turning from a former way of living to a life face to face with Jesus is what we call repentance; a new start in life; rebirth. We saw that happen in the heart of one of the criminals crucified with Jesus in today’s Gospel.

The repentant criminal told the other one; 23.[41] *We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds…*’ And then he turned to Jesus to ask him, ‘*Jesus,*

remember me when you come into your Kingdom.'

What we are privileged to see here is the turning of a human soul from condemned criminal to saint – in an instant. He names what he has been; he renounces it and he turns to Jesus. He calls on Jesus' name and asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his Kingdom. There is nothing else he can do; it's not as though there's scope for him now to amend his lifestyle. And Jesus receives him immediately – takes him at his word and receives what he offers. *Today* you will be with me in paradise; restored to freedom, restored to the fulness of life.

This is an astonishing scene. True to character, the people Jesus keeps company with here are crucified criminals. So none of us should ever imagine ourselves beyond the reach of Jesus' love, and never imagine ourselves beneath his notice.

In pastoral ministry, I come in contact with people who've become convinced they've been forgotten or locked out of God's love. Aboriginal Australians and refugees quite understandably feel like this. Others with psychological or emotional issues are similarly plagued by this sort of exile. Often their cyclical bouts of depression and highs make them and their supporters all but lose hope.

I am constantly shocked by the terrible burdens so many people carry in life. So many people on the cross. My job is to point out Jesus to them; Jesus on a friendly, neighbouring Cross.

If you're on the cross yourself, often your suffering will be made worse by feeling that you're cut off from everybody. You're stuck with your pain while everyone around you seems to be free to go about their lives. When I find someone is in that sort of pain – and their pain is made worse by feeling so isolated, the only person who *can* help is someone who knows the same level of pain. And they need to know that person is right there beside them.

So I may talk with them about this scene in Luke's gospel. Maybe that criminal who turned to Jesus could only have turned to someone who knew what that pain and despair felt like; could only have turned in that moment – and if he'd not been welcomed there and then, he might have sunk back into the torpor and hopelessness of his torture and died alone.

I think there's something we need to draw from this scene. It has to do with our discipleship to Christ our King – our imitation of his example – choosing to live as welcoming fellow citizens with that criminal crucified beside Jesus. Are there guidelines Jesus gives us to follow? Yes. First, 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, by our commitment to the poor, the captive, the outcasts of our community; by renouncing spiritual blindness – but most of all, by doing it *today.*

A plaque on the entrance to the old Epworth building in Pirie Street says this; '*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."* TODAY! Amen