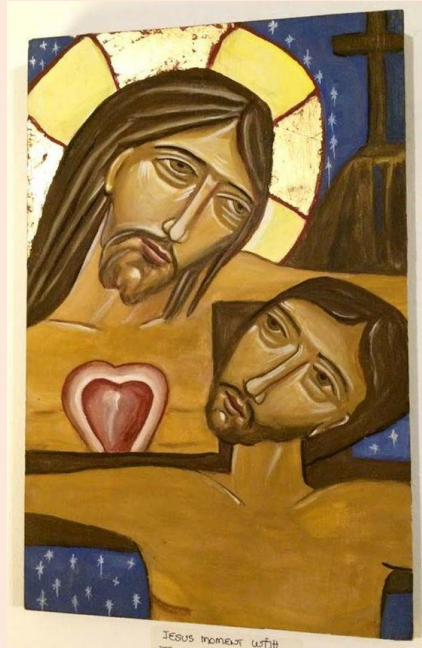


“This Day You Will Be With Me In Paradise”



They called him the good thief; and someone, somewhere at some time gave him the name Dismas. It is a dismal sounding name. Perhaps, I thought, it is so because of the sadness of his life? I only recently learned Dismas is a name given to him in the gospel of Nicodemus, an apocryphal writing, and the name means sunset or death. We do not know his age or his village. We do not know his crime, although over the centuries he has been called the good thief. Between all 4 Gospels he and the other man crucified with Jesus are named criminals, bandits, rebels and that their crime must have been pretty serious.

So, what has made the good thief so famous? It is Jesus who made him so for although Jesus spoke very few words from the cross, he spoke to this man who not only defended Jesus from the taunts of his fellow criminal but asked Jesus to remember him when he would come into his Kingdom. It is interesting to note that in all four of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the account of two men having been crucified with Jesus is told. This is all the more interesting when we see that some aspects of this time, so important in our Salvation history are omitted

Today you and I are setting out for the next few minutes to spend time with the three men who are walking the Via Dolorosa. Did the two men also on their way to execution with Jesus have anyone to mourn them as they walked that terrible journey? They, too, heard the jeering of the crowd and that people were focusing their hatred, and even perhaps their fears, on the tragic figure of Jesus, the man who bore the name of Saviour.

Were the criminals relieved to be spared a little of that torment? Did they go before Jesus or follow after him? I have a feeling they went first as they were not as injured as Jesus whose flesh had been torn from him during the scourging, whose very ribs were bruised, cracked, broken by the blows of the Roman style lash, known throughout history as a means of horror and torment. Jesus would already have been finding it difficult to draw a breath, his lungs already beginning to fill with fluid from what we know as the physiological result of that terrible lashing. And so, he was more likely to fall. No, Jesus would have been behind the criminals as his movements were slower and the soldiers wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

More than that, Jesus wore the painful and mocking crown of thorns driven deeply into his skull, the blood blinding his vision. On he went, carrying that heavy piece of wood which would become the well-known symbol of the cross once he reached Golgotha. He fell numerous times on that journey, on a road that was worn by the feet of many who had been led there in the past to that place of humiliation and in the case of Jesus the place of the ultimate sacrifice. Yes, I am thinking perhaps in a small way there was a little relief on the part of the criminals walking that same road that momentous Friday morning. And on that way one of the criminals was seething with anger at the injustice of life hating all around him, perhaps most of all hating himself. He particularly hated Jesus who could maybe do something to relieve his torment; after all he did say he was a king, the king of the Jews. He perhaps even heard Jesus was supposed to have been the one awaited, the Messiah. Hah! A load of rubbish! Here he is, in worse shape than I am, struggling to reach the same tormenting end.

But now I am imagining the other criminal. He, too, is walking under the weight of his instrument of torture. He, too, is full of fear and terror of what awaits him, for he knows as well as anyone on that road that day what awaits him on that infamous hill. On the road he hears when the man they call Jesus has fallen and the soldiers are going nuts in their fury at being delayed. They, like himself, want to get this over with and each fall of Jesus slows that horrible procession. He hears, too, the sound of the voice of this man who is being treated so much worse than himself. His voice seems to touch his very soul. He begins to listen for it, a sound like no other that is balm to his spirit in the midst of the jeering and hollering.

What is that I hear? Weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children? Who does that? Why is he not angry? Oh! Now I hear someone is helping ... I guess the soldiers want to speed him up any way they can. This all has to be over and done with before the Sabbath, and it is Passover. Yes, I should be with my family celebrating the

feast instead of here. A new kind of silence has come over the crowd. What is it? Oh I wish I could turn around to see. I stumble a little and at risk of feeling the whip I fall so that I may look to see what has happened. Oh, a woman is facing Jesus. She looks so distressed, yet she is comforting him. Someone says it is his mother. Where is my mother today? There is a small group with him and there is like an aura of love around them that stills just momentarily the hand of the soldier. What IS it about this man? The people are crying and the wailing is now getting much stronger than the jeering. Oh someone has rushed from the crowd, a woman. She managed to wipe some of the blood from his face before the make us move again.

We are here now. Oh, how I have dreaded this moment! Yet, I feel I deserve what is happening to me unlike this man Jesus. We hang now looking down on the spectators and soldiers. I hear my companion on the other side of Jesus who hangs between us. I hear him jeering at Jesus. What is WRONG with him that he is using up his last breath to be hateful. I can't stand it any longer. I have to say something though it is hard to draw a breath. I remind him that we deserve what is happening to us but this man has done nothing wrong. I say: Jesus, Remember me when you come into your kingdom. I can't believe it! He is so wounded and barely able to speak yet he is speaking to me. **This day you will be with me in paradise.** No reprimand, no warning I may have to spend time in purgatory. He has promised me THIS DAY I AM TO BE WITH HIM IN PARADISE.

All my suffering is fading into the distance. I believe him. I know it is true. I feel the balm of his love pouring into my soul. This day, this very day, I am to be with him in paradise. I hear him speak another few words. He is crying out now: **Eli, Eli lama sabactani!** So, even he can feel as if God has abandoned him! He says he is thirsty. I hoped he would take the drink to relieve the pain but he refuses it. Now He is forgiving those who have crucified him. **Father, forgive them they know not what they are doing.** He is speaking to his mother and to a man who has accompanied her. **Woman, behold your son.** And to the man he calls John he says, **behold your mother.**

I can't believe this ... he is dying, but he is taking time to take care of his mother. I wish I had taken better care of mine. Oh he is near the end. He has just said **It is Finished. Into your hands I commend my spirit.** Yes, Jesus, and into YOUR hands I commend MY spirit. God, you are my God, for you I long. This day I surely will be with you in paradise.