

## TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME

### Luke 23:43

Rev. Leo Douma 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008

Have you ever noticed how, often, the principles in the Bible are the opposite to the way we often think or do things. For example, would you be willing to give your life for another? Not likely, unless it is some one we love very much, some one who is very good to us and means a lot to us, you know a child, a spouse (but may be not even then). But would you be willing to give your life for a convicted criminal? Say a murderer, some one who has destroyed life and devastated others by that murder; a vile character who would probably abuse you and threaten you as soon as look at you. We would say “What a stupid question. We would never do that, of course. We would not even go near such a person or talk to them. We’d want absolutely nothing to do with them.

Another thought. What if you need to be rescued because your life was in danger? What sort of person would you put your trust in? We would automatically say: “Some one in a position of power, some one very strong, some one very alive!” We would not put much hope in a person who is nearly dead, who is unable to go any where or do anything.

Yet notice what we have here in our text. A convicted criminal who is being executed for his terrible crimes, and who has reviled Jesus, asks Jesus, who is also being crucified, to save him! And to such a character, in his own dying condition, Jesus gives an assurance and guarantee: *“I tell you the truth. Today you will be with me in paradise.”* To understand the significance of these words we need to see to whom they are said and in what context. We see Jesus crucified between two criminals; as Luke carefully points out in (23:33) *“-one on his right, the other on his left”*. The placing of Jesus in the middle is significant. It suggests that he is the leader of this group. It implies that they are ‘birds of a feather’, with Jesus in the middle as the head of the

group. Indeed Pilate had ordered a written notice above Jesus (:38) “*This is Jesus the King of the Jews*”. It was Pilate’s way of getting back at the Jews. The Jews were always trouble makers, as far as he and many Romans were concerned. It has been the pressure of the Pharisees and the yelling mob that has led Pilate to order Jesus crucified, even though Pilate had not found him guilty of anything. But with the notice above Jesus’ head Pilate got even with the mob: Here is the Jewish king and his followers; nothing but scum. And here is what they deserve- the execution reserved for criminals and the despised. The shame of the situation is not lost on the people. They watch in disappointment and disgust. They had hoped Jesus was the Messiah and would do something for them. Now they reject and despise him as much as the criminals on either side of him. The Pharisees sneer. The soldiers mock. Even the criminals hanging next to Jesus, despite their own suffering, are still true to their vile characters and spit out their insults. All the attention and abuse is centred on Jesus, hanging in the middle. It is a situation of shame and disgrace, far more than even this crowd understands. For ironically the sign above Jesus is correct. Jesus is the King; not only of the Jews, but of the universe. Jesus was not just being smart when in Luke 19:40, he said to the Pharisees as he rode the donkey into Jerusalem that even if the crowd kept quiet and stopped praising, the “*stones will cry out*”. Creation recognized its maker: in Jesus is the God of all. And now here, at the cross, humanity was disgracing its maker, rejecting and murdering the Son of God.

But if we look closely, in the midst of the disgrace we also see grace, amazing grace. In fact what we see already here is the different effect of the cross on people. Let’s zoom in and focus on those two criminals hanging there with Jesus. Notice, both are criminals. Both are guilty before a human court and before God. Both insulted Jesus (so the other gospels tell us). But then one changes; a change that brings these words of grace from Jesus. And it is the change that makes all the difference, the difference for one criminal in his position before God. If we look carefully we can see God’s electing hand here; one is chosen and changes, the other does not. What has caused the change? Perhaps the way Jesus prayed to his father to forgive his

persecutors. (Remember Christ's first saying on the cross: "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.*") Who knows what the criminal had seen or heard of Jesus. May be he had heard of Jesus' preaching or his miracles. But, whatever the human situation, it is clear that God is at work here. In his grace God has given a glimpse of the true character of Jesus to this criminal and the criminal has responded. And with this God is also doing something else. In his grace God is encouraging his Son. As Jesus prepares for the agony of hell, the Father, as it were, says "Look, here is a believer already! Look, Son, look this is what your suffering will achieve. Even a hardened criminal will repent and believe!"

Now, notice carefully the things the criminal did and said that demonstrates this change. Here are some lessons for those who are wondering how to be forgiven and be right with God. Firstly we see that the criminal rebuked his partner in crime. He says (:40) "*Don't you fear God since you are under the same sentence*". There is an awareness of God. And the realization that God is Creator and Judge, whose laws they have broken and to whom they must answer. They might mock Jesus, who is now seen as so helpless and will soon die; but so will they. Secondly, there is a realization of guilt. The criminal realizes he deserves his punishment and he acknowledges it (41): "*We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.*" It seems like they were partners in crime, which magnifies God's grace even more, when they were both guilty, yet one is soon to be forgiven. Thirdly, the criminal senses Jesus as being innocent. Jesus should not be there on the cross (41): "*...this man has done nothing wrong.*" Jesus had been tried by two courts- Pilate's and the Sanhedrin. These were the two highest forms of justice and religion, ever, yet this criminal realized things were very wrong, something stank. Jesus should not have been there. Jesus he saw was an innocent man. Fourthly, he turns to Jesus and puts his hope in him (:42) "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" What exactly the criminal meant by "*the kingdom*" is not entirely clear. Perhaps he was thinking of Jesus as the Judge at the resurrection. The Pharisees taught a resurrection at the end of time. What is clear, though, is that he sees Jesus as one with authority, as

King, and trusts Jesus, one day, somehow, to do the right thing by him. It is a humble request: "...remember me...- think of me when you come in power. May be you can find a little spot for me out the back of your kingdom."

An initial look at this criminal would say there is very little going for this bloke. The elements of what it takes to be forgiven and become a child of God are there: being aware of God, admitting guilt before God, placing your trust in Jesus. But his knowledge of Jesus is very basic. And his life had been a waste, a disgrace. He was the sort of hard-nosed criminal type that most Christians would shun; firstly, because of his terrible background and character, and secondly his lack of understanding of Christian teachings. You might even doubt his sincerity – a last ditched calling out to God because he was facing death. It's amazing how many people pray when they know they are about to die. But Jesus does not see it that way. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah describes him as the one who does not break a '*bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick*'. Whatever doubts we might have about this criminal is taken away by Jesus' full acceptance of him. Jesus recognizes in this man some one who sees his own sin, who admits to it and trusts Jesus, even if he doesn't understand it all. And that's good enough for Jesus. He was the one who spoke of a faith as small as a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds.

It is to such a person that Jesus speaks his second words on the cross, beautiful words of assurance and grace (43): "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" These are not just nice, but empty words given to calm a fretting friend. This is not a "You'll be right mate, don't worry about it. I'm sure it will all be fine". These words of Jesus are very costly words; because for this criminal to enter the kingdom, Jesus will have to carry his guilt. Jesus will have to be willing to have all the rottenness of that criminal's life transferred to him, to himself, and suffer for it in hell. And Jesus is willing to do that. In fact he guarantees not only his willingness to suffer hell in this criminal's place, but also that he will succeed. Notice the first words: "*I tell you*

*the truth...*” That can also be translated “*Truly, truly I say to you...*” or “*Amen, amen-* so shall it be!” Throughout his ministry, when Jesus wanted to make a strong point he would say “*Amen, amen, truly I say...*” One commentator (Schilder) has called this “*Amen*” here the ‘paradoxical amen’. Jesus is at the end of his life, dying on a cross. How can he determine anything? And in a few hours he will be screaming “*My God why...why have you forsaken me?*” It would have appeared to the jeering crowd that Jesus was a lost cause. The criminal himself would have wondered later, as he hung next to Jesus and heard that terrifying scream if all was not lost. But Jesus was in fact in control. He was; he is king! He was working out the way of salvation, of bringing forgiveness and hope to the world. And he reassured the repentant criminal of that as he said: (43) “*I tell you the truth...amen! TODAY you will be with me in paradise.*” The criminal in his vague understanding had asked for mercy on the last day; on the Day of Judgment. But Jesus promises “Today...” Notice the language of a king. Today, this very same day you have received mercy. You are now pardoned. “*TODAY you will be with be in paradise.*” Jesus is hanging on the cross, and like the criminal is about to die. Yet he is still the judge who determines eternal life or eternal death. Judgment is made by our reaction to Jesus on the cross. One criminal is saved, the other is lost. One is saved because he has faith in Jesus as saviour and Lord. The other is lost because he does not believe and continues to mock Jesus. And so it is with the entire world now. We are all judged by our reaction to Jesus on the cross. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1, “*To those who are perishing the cross is foolishness. But to those who are being saved Christ is the wisdom of God.*” Today, as we believe or don’t believe our eternal destiny is determined. When we trust in Christ crucified we receive forgiveness and our eternal life begins at that moment of belief. Then death is not the end, nor some sort of purgatory, a waiting place. When we trust Jesus, after death life continues at a different level with Christ in paradise. Notice also the emphasis in Jesus’ words “*...today you will be WITH ME...in paradise.*” The criminal had hoped that Jesus as a great king might even remember that he existed. You know, hoping for some menial task in some place out the back of the kingdom. I remember once a woman in a previous congregation expressing to me her hope that God would let her slip in by the servant’s entrance to heaven

because she didn't think she was good enough to be received at the front entrance. But I assured her all God's children will be embraced by the Father as he races towards them –like the parable of the prodigal son. We see in our text that Jesus does not talk to this criminal in terms of his own kingly office and Jesus arranging some servants quarters for the criminal. He says "...you *will be WITH ME...*" Where I am you will be. The criminal would be where Jesus was. That's because when Jesus in a few hours had cried out his terrifying "*Why God...?*" He would have paid the price for the criminal's sin. Yes this criminal entered heaven being seen as righteous and as perfect as Jesus himself. There are no second class or third class rooms in heaven. Yes, this criminal had wasted his life, destroyed another's life and made a misery for many others. He rightly deserved to be there on the cross. But at the end of this day on his cross next to Jesus, he would be with Jesus, basking in all his kingly glory.

What remarkable words these are, this second saying of Jesus on the cross. They are words of assurance from a dying Jesus for a dying criminal: "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" You know there is a challenge and reassurance here for us. If Jesus was willing to lay down his life for the type that hung next to him, then we as his church, his body, should also be reaching out to all people, no matter what their character or background. There is no way known we should give the impression that certain sorts are not good enough for us, or that we prefer they weren't here. No matter a person's history, culture, language, record, if you/they, like the criminal have faced God, admitted their sin/wrong and trust in Jesus then they/you are all welcome here! The assurance is that if Jesus was willing to lay down his life for this person who ruined his life and that of others, he will also forgive you, no matter what you have done in your life or how little you know Jesus. You hear that? No matter what you have done. In Jesus that dark secret is forgiven, when we come to him in repentance and trust. At this time of Lent we are asked to reflect on our lives, to see our wrongs and change for Jesus. Some times we don't want to look at our lives, we don't want to remember. We'd rather keep things blocked out, hidden, buried deep.

But if a murderous criminal, with the barest knowledge about Jesus, at the last desperate moment confessed his need for Jesus and received forgiveness, then Jesus will surely forgive you of everything too. Trust Jesus and know that for you too, today, paradise is yours!