

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships Through Love.

Christ The King Sunday
Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus promised the repentant criminal. The king of glory hangs on a cross between two criminals. Many of the people who stood at the foot of the cross mocked him. They couldn't believe they finally nailed the man they hated on a cross.

But one of the two criminals decided to join others to mock the one who has suffered injustice. *"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"* He said. But the kind of salvation he was looking for was relief from his agony. He was feeling the pain of the nails in his hands and in his feet and the scorching sun didn't make things easy for him.

In just the same way that Jesus didn't respond to the mockery of those at the foot of the cross, he didn't respond to the mockery of the criminal. The fact is, you and I have little to no reason to respond to those who mock us. We do not have to go low to their level because we do not have any point to prove to them.

Interestingly, the other criminal called him out on his mockery of Jesus, affirmed their punishment and took responsibility for their actions. He also rejected the condemnation of Jesus because he knew that Jesus had done nothing wrong to deserve the cruel punishment.

It is important to understand that this criminal not only refused to take the side of the Jewish leaders, but he also refused to remain silent. He spoke up. He knew he was at the end of his rope. He knew he had nothing to lose but everything to gain from defending the man who had committed no crime. He knew there was no savior coming from anywhere to save him from his agony but if only he could entrust himself to the man who had committed no crime, maybe, just maybe, he can be assured of a place in God's kingdom.

And so, he spoke up, not to justify himself, but to seek redemption from the Christ who had been turned into a criminal by those who couldn't stand his transformative words and actions of freedom, justice, mercy, healing and love.

The reality is that being nailed to the cross, the punishment reserved for those who were considered enemies of the state was brutal. It was torture. The crucified was meant to die a painful death. And these people wanted Jesus, the anointed one of God, to experience that painful death. But for what crime? Pilate asked.

This is the moment where the Christ hymn in Philippians 2 comes alive when Paul invites us to consider these words *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name."*

The man who was despised by his own people, condemned to death by his own people and died a criminal's death on a cross, has become for us our redemptive story. That your story and mine have no value unless it is tied up with the story of Jesus the Christ who although was God, humbled himself, took the form of a Slave and died on the cross for us.

I believe that it is for this reason that he prayed for forgiveness for his haters because they did not know what they were doing. If only they knew.

An author once wrote this *"The key to forgiving others is to stop focusing on what they did to you and focus on what God did for you"* And for the anointed one of God, what God had done for him, was doing through him and will do through him was such that he could only focus on God.

Whereas Jesus didn't respond to the criminal who mocked him, he responded to the criminal who was honest, repentant and aware of his own sins, Jesus responded to his request with these words "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Paradise is the realization of the joy that is made possible because of prevenient grace. Jesus is dying but he's still in the love giving mood. Jesus is dying but he is still in the mercy sharing mood. Jesus is dying but he is focused on what God can do for the repentant criminal.

Today, this day, is your day of salvation. And the one who offers that salvation is the crucified Lord and King whose kingdom has no boundary and being a part of it isn't dependent on how worse you are.

The promise of paradise is the one promise that Jesus offers to both the criminal and us, not because we are perfect and holy people but because God doesn't turn away sinners in disgust but moves toward sinners, bringing us his redemptive grace. And far from focusing on our sins, God sees us through the eyes of love. And because God only sees us through the eyes of love, God is always with us. God is with us, when we are hanging on our crosses. God is with us in relationships that flowers, blossoms and even die. Emmanuel, God is with us in life and even in death.

This is the blessing to which I cling, we do not need to justify ourselves in order to be in God's kingdom. All we need to do is to burn like the light of the repentant criminal who only asked to be remembered.

John Wesley once said asked this question "What is your secret? Why do so many people come to hear you preach?" *Wesley answered* — "I get alone with God in prayer. He sets me on fire. The people come out to watch me burn." What a powerful imagery. People would walk miles and miles to hear him tell the improbable story of the King of love.

The joy in what John Wesley said was that when people saw him burn, they could tell that the Lord was doing something marvelous with him. They could tell the hand of God upon him.

Our question for this morning is, do we burn with God's fire of light? Do we burn with the love of Jesus the crucified king? Do you burn like the repentant criminal? And if we don't, how do we do it?

A story got me thinking about what it means to burn with God's light. On Veteran's Day a few years ago Chili's Restaurant offered free meals to veterans in appreciation for their service. An African American veteran together with his service dog went to Chili's to take advantage of the free food. But as he sat and ate his food, a White patron confronted him about his credentials.

The manager was called in to verify whether the man was deserving of the free food. Despite proving that he was indeed a veteran, the manager took the food away from the table, leading the man to walk out of the restaurant in shame.

When I heard the story, I wondered to myself, what in God's name will lead someone to question a man he didn't know about his bonafides and his right to earn free food? And even if the man was misrepresenting himself, what has that got to do with him? And why did the manager take the food away from the veteran?

Here's the point, the light and fire of the gospel cannot burn within us when we pick and choose which veteran is deserving of free food or who is it that deserves a place in God's paradise. We must always aim to be like the repentant criminal who burned with light.

People like the repentant criminal do not stay silent, nor do they collude with others in supporting absurdities, they speak up, they protest, they challenge others because they understand that their own salvation is tied up with the salvation that Christ offers to all people from all nations and all languages.

Remember, people like the repentant criminal are sinners who recognize their own sinfulness. But they also believe that repentance is the joy of God, and that it is the lost and the forgotten people in whom God's joy springs up.

I heard about this kindergarten teacher who was trying to explain to her students about self-esteem. He said to her class, anyone who feels you are dumb, please stand up. She didn't think anyone would stand up. And she would make the point that no one is dumb. Little Johnny waited a few moments and then stood up. She said to herself, now what am I going to do. She said "now, Johnny, do you really feel like you're dumb? He said 'No ma'am, I just hate to see you standing there all by yourself.'"

I have had this hymn on my mind over the past couple of weeks. I sing the Almighty power of God. And it reminds me of a 13th century Persian poet by the name of Hafiz who wrote this poem:

Even
After
All this time
The Sun never says to
the Earth

“You owe me”

Look
What happens
With a love like that
It lightens the whole sky

Like the Earth which owes the sun, we also owe God. Although God has never said we owe Him, we do owe God, not only for our lives and the light that shines in our lives but for the salvation we have.

At the center of Christianity stands the suffering God and the cross of Christ, but our joy as Christians is that we remember the death of Christ in the light of his resurrection. And that same joy reminds us that a little honesty, self-awareness and humility can earn us a piece of God’s kingdom.

Amen.