

GOSPEL

Luke 23:35-43

The people stayed there before the cross watching Jesus. As for the leaders, they jeered at him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.' The soldiers mocked him too, and when they approached to offer him vinegar they said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.' Above him there was an inscription: 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals hanging there abused him. 'Are you not the Christ?' he said. 'Save yourself and us as well.' But the other spoke up and rebuked him. 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said. 'You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus,' he said, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.' 'Indeed, I promise you,' he replied, 'today you will be with me in paradise.'

A HOMILY OF ST JOHN PAUL II

23 November 1986 (Excerpt)

The Liturgy brings us today to the place where the words of Saint Paul are confirmed in a definitive way, the place where the truth of the Redemption is most fully revealed.

We are on Calvary at the moment of the Crucifixion. Together with Jesus, two criminals are also being crucified. One of these insults him, saying: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well". But the second instead says: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom". This second man believed in the Kingdom of the Crucified One. He believed in the Kingdom that draws near to each human person through Christ Crucified.

Truly, it was not flesh and blood that had revealed this truth to him, but the Father - this Father who frees us from "the power of darkness and creates a place for us in the Kingdom of the Son that he loves". The Son, Jesus, in agony on the Cross, says to his crucified companion: "Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise".

The main theme of today's liturgy is expressed in the phrase: "Peace of heart is the heart of peace". These words on the Solemnity of Christ the King are

confirmed by what Saint Paul proclaims in the second reading. Christ, the image of the invisible God, is at the same time "the firstborn of all creations". Moreover, "God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the Cross".

Peace of heart, peace of the human conscience, is precisely the fruit of this reconciliation through the Cross.

The scene of Jesus in agony on the Cross, hanging between two criminals, is a striking symbol of the mystery of reconciliation. In the first place, it shows us vividly the horrifying effects of sin, the stark and terrible reality of evil, the awful consequences of disobedience and alienation from God. Who could gaze on the Cross of Christ and not acknowledge the reality of sin? And not only the reality of sin but also its destructive consequences?

Sin is a personal act which disrupts one's relationship with God and weakens the intellect and will. Sin also has an impact on others. "There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, that exclusively concerns the persons committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family".

Today's Gospel scene reminds us of an even greater reality than sin, a higher and more important truth: namely the redeeming love of Christ, a love which is stronger than evil, stronger than death. It was at this precise point in human history, when he was offering his life for us on the Cross, that "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself". As Saint Paul says regarding this event of loving mercy, "through his blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins".

Yes, Christ on the Cross "was reconciling the whole world to himself", all of humanity of every time and place, "everything in heaven and everything on earth". This is why the Son of God came into the world: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life".

continued over page ►

And yet, reconciliation is offered to each person individually. Each one must freely decide to accept or reject it. We must remember the two criminals crucified with Jesus. Each of them acting by his own free choice responded to Jesus, but in opposite ways. God respects our human freedom. He generously offers us the gift of reconciliation, but he does not force us to accept. He gives us the freedom to reject it. We must freely choose it if we are to belong to the Kingdom of God.

And if we do desire to belong to the Kingdom of God, what are the ways in which this Kingdom of God begins to take root in the human heart? How do reconciliation and peace come about in our innermost self?

The first way, of course, is prayer. This means liturgical prayer in which we join ourselves with Christ the High Priest in the official worship of the Church, and individual prayer, when we meet the Lord alone in our soul. Prayer opens the mind and heart to God. It deepens our longing for his Kingdom. Prayer consciously links us to the Communion of the Saints who support us by their continual intercession.

A second way of gaining peace of heart is by accepting the Gospel message. Jesus began his public preaching with a call to conversion: "Repent, and believe in the Good News". The Church continues Christ's mission by condemning sin, calling people to conversion, and inviting them to

be reconciled to God. And in every age, the Church proclaims the goodness and mercy of the Lord. She invites us all to "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely" and to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith".

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/Homily?



Head: What does it mean that Jesus reveals his kingship not through power or victory, but through suffering, forgiveness, and mercy on the Cross?



Heart: Like the repentant thief, how do you bring your own guilt, weakness, or need for peace before Christ? How does his mercy change the way you see yourself and others?



Hands: What concrete step could you take this week to make Christ's mercy visible — in forgiveness, in prayer, or in reconciliation with someone else?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (for example, "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.