

GOSPEL

LUKE 23:1-49

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.' And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

A REFLECTION BY FR BRENDAN BYRNE SJ

Jesus' 'exodus' to the Father reaches its climax in the scene of his crucifixion and death at the place of the Skull.

The gospel describes the responses of those present at the scene. The mockery of the leaders focuses upon the messianic claims of Jesus and the capacity to save that, were he truly the Messiah, he might have been expected to show. Thus, they scoff. The mockery reaches its climax with that of the criminals crucified with Jesus. One desperately needs "salvation" in the shape of rescue from his terrible death. But seeing Jesus, the 'pretended Messiah', reduced to the same impotence as himself, all he can do is join in the bitter taunts of the others.

The other man though shows a total process of conversion. He owns his wrongdoing and admits the justness of the penalty they have incurred. He recognises the total innocence of Jesus. Having distanced Jesus from himself, and his fellow criminal in this respect, he then truly and genuinely turns to Jesus for salvation.

The word 'save' has been debased in the preceding threefold mockery. At this point it can only refer to rescue from the present plight upon the cross. But that is not the path 'salvation' is taking now, neither for Jesus nor for the man himself. So, the man does not specify the kind of salvation he seeks. Addressing Jesus simply by his personal name, he begs to simply be 'remembered in his kingdom'. The plea acknowledges that Jesus is King, but recognises as well that his kingdom is not simply identifiable with messianic kingdom of conventional expectation; it is the one to which Jesus is going even as he dies upon the cross. The man does not seek a high place in this kingdom; he simply asks that Jesus keep him in mind.

The majestic response of Jesus transforms the whole perspective. Not in the distant future, not even tomorrow or the day after, but 'today you will be with me in Paradise'. Here again we hear the great Lukan 'today' transferring salvation from the remote future to the present, on the basis of renewed relationship with God. The man had asked to be included in the kingdom – something we know from the prelude to the institution of the Eucharist is to be postponed to an indefinite future. Jesus assures him that he will have a foretaste of salvation in his own company in paradise 'today'. The essence of salvation

is not to be saved from physical death but to be 'with Jesus', to accompany him on the 'exodus' to the Father now underway. The man's conversion of heart and faith in Jesus has readied him for this journey. This climactic moment in the gospel provides a 'point of insertion' for all the readers prepared to take a similar path.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where are you in this scene – wailing, scoffing, on the cross, watching and waiting, forgiving of enemies? How am I at times each of these varied groups who witnessed the crucifixion?
- This week we celebrate the passion, death & resurrection of Jesus as the great moment of salvation. What does this salvation mean for you, from what has it saved you?

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 (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to 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 reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.