

“Today is the Day”

Luke 23:43

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This evening, we continue in our discussion of our Lord’s Passion, namely the focus on His crucifixion, as we look at the second word of Jesus from the cross. Jesus’ words come to us from Luke 23:43, where Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not after 400 years of penance in purgatory, but today. You can get lost in all kinds of theological discussions about the intermediate state between death and the resurrection of the dead on the last day, but the one thing that is certain, because the very Son of God has proclaimed it to be so, is that on the believer’s last day on this earth, today is the day.

It is the day that you will enter into eternal triumph and paradise with your Lord and Savior, who has redeemed you though you did not deserve the redemption He won. You were lost, and are now found. Once dead in your trespasses, you have moved beyond the condemnation of eternal death, and now have the hope of eternal life in Christ. But sin still lurks around every corner, waiting to pounce like a roaring lion to corrupt your faith and cause you to despair. That is the Christian struggle as we walk this earth. We are all *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously saint and sinner, and we must daily battle our sinful flesh as we live out our lives as those who have been made righteous for the sake of Christ alone.

The hard reality of sin and its work to convince you that you are not worthy of the salvation Jesus has won is that it is right. You’re not worthy! The truth of our total depravity is that we deserve nothing but death and eternal contempt for our transgressions, the ones we know and the ones we do not, the ones we have done and the ones we have left undone. It is an ever present part of our lives that we must constantly work to throw off this sinful flesh and live good and righteous lives in Christ. And that is the crux of being *simul iustus et peccator*. We will never come to a time when that battle stops, or becomes easy. By the strength of the Holy Spirit we are able to accomplish good works, good works that are only good because they are works of the Spirit, but we will never reach a point where we are righteous beings capable of living the perfect lives that God’s Law demands of us.

Your sin should cause you despair. It should make you feel like you can’t do enough or are lost in a dying world that just wants to swallow you up and destroy your

faith. That is what sin does, especially willful and pernicious sin. It eats away at your soul, piece by piece, if you allow it to consume your life and rule it over and above the Word of God which has called you to faith in Jesus Christ. Because that is its goal. The devil seeks to destroy you by it, and if left alone to wander in a dying wasteland of sin, it would indeed destroy you.

The thief on the cross knew that. He knew that as he confessed his sins before the Son of God, hanging on the cross receiving the “due reward of his deeds,” that he had no hope on his own. And so he begs for the mercy of Jesus in Luke 23:42, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And in His great mercy and love, Jesus grants this man’s request as a penitent sinner. He tells the man, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” For this thief on the cross, having been redeemed of his sin by the all-atoning sacrifice of Jesus, today is the day. But today is not his day because he repented, or because he earned it. Driven to repentance in the face of death, the righteous punishment of the Law of God, which Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death,” he beseeched Jesus for mercy, and it was granted by Jesus’ intercession to the Father, who by the Holy Spirit granted this man forgiveness and salvation for Jesus’ sake. Only by the sacrifice of Jesus was this man saved, and not of his own works.

What Paul goes on to say in Romans 6:23 is truly the foundation of this man’s salvation. The rest of that verse, “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing this man has done or could have done would have removed the punishment of death for his sin, just as nothing you can do will remove the same sentence of death that is upon all of fallen humanity because of Adam’s sin. But thanks be to God that we have been given this free gift on account of Christ! For by it we are redeemed and no longer face the punishment of the condemnation we so rightly deserve. When our day does indeed come, that day will not be our day in the sense that we have a part in it, but it will be the day that the Lord has made!

Psalm 118:21-24 sums up this entire excursus in such a nice little bow. Here is what the Psalmist says, “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” He overjoyedly explodes into song over the blessings of God, namely the gift of salvation which is His for the sake of the cornerstone on which it is

built, for the sake of Jesus Christ. And this not of his doing, but the day of his salvation is the day that THE LORD has made.

The thief on the cross, whether coming to faith in that moment, having been brought to faith prior, being a lapsed Jew who had a foundational understanding, or whatever insinuations we want to make about this man's faith, the truth is that in that moment, he knows that the day of his salvation is the day that the Lord has made. He proclaims it to be so as he asks the Lord of all things to remember him in His kingdom, because without Jesus' intercession, he has no hope of entering eternal life. He was lost, and now is found.

That is why Jesus said He came. In Luke 19:10, the Lord says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." His purpose in becoming man was for our sakes, for our benefit. He came to be our Savior. I was actually watching a video last week of a preacher (albeit a very very poor one) spouting off about how the word "savior" was too divisive and confusing to be used in the church. Why else do we exist as a church if not to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who has SAVED the world by the shedding of His blood on the cross?? That is what we have been called to do, that by the work of His church in the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments He might accomplish His desire that all men would be saved. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23, "but we preach Christ crucified," because He is the Savior of nations and the sole author of our salvation, and so we entreat Him as the beautiful Advent hymn begins, "Savior of the nations, Come."

I pray for each and every believer in Christ, that you would have a long and prosperous life for as long as the Lord continues to have need of your witness on this side of heaven. But whether it truly is today, tomorrow, or years in the future, for all of us one day, today will be the day. Not a day of fear and sadness, not a day of soul-sucking pain and agony, but one of peace and joy. Because as a baptized child of God, washed in the blood of the Lamb who was slain, on that day you will be comforted by these words of Jesus who awaits you in the heavenly glory, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." Amen.