



## **Good Friday**

### **The Passion of Christ**

The passion reading you've just heard is long – and yet I want to focus on only one sentence – did you even notice it?

'There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle'.

The reference being here to the two thieves who were executed with Jesus that first Good Friday.

Suh an important sentence.

But it seems to say so little. 'There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle'.

It's like a passing and quite irrelevant point of historical detail for John. John, to be fair, wasn't really interested in these two men. But we should be.

The other Gospel writers were. A little.

In Mark, and in Luke, and in Matthew, we get more detail about what is one of the most touching and important stories in scripture. Only a little more detail – but quite crucial to our glimpse into the nature of God, and our understanding of our own faith. Our own pain.

For those who don't know the story, it goes like this.

Jesus hangs on the cross between two thieves, also being crucified.

One thief mocks him, and says, if you are the Christ, if you're who you say you are, go on save Yourself and us.

It's a challenge – made in desperation, and forgivable – but a challenge - God, if you really exist, prove it...now. Stop this now - for your sake and for mine.

But the other thief puts the first thief back in his box - we're being punished for a reason; Jesus isn't. He's done nothing. 'We receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' Then he turns to Jesus, and he says, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.'

And Jesus says to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise''.

Today you will be with me in paradise.

Wow.

Jesus is saying, you will be with me.

You have been redeemed.

We know so little about this man ... was he guilty or innocent, he confessed guilt, but guilty of what – stealing – did that deserve death? In those days, sadly, probably. But did he have a fair trial? Did he have a trial at all?

Did the thief have a mother of his own at the foot of his cross, weeping; did he wonder who would care for her? Or was he alone in this world?

Had he done something heinous or just upset the Roman way?

What was his name?

What was his faith?

I read something about this thief on the cross the other day, and it made me think. I hope it will make you think too. I'm paraphrasing slightly. But it goes something like this.

How does the thief on the cross fit into your theology?

And we all have a theology – even atheists have a theology They have a belief about God – that God doesn't exist.

But how does the thief on the cross fit into the theology of a Christian? Into your theology? Into what you believe about God?

So, paraphrasing –

That thief, whom Jesus promised to carry to paradise, was not baptised insofar as we know, certainly not baptised as a follower of Jesus. He hadn't been confirmed by a Bishop or received Communion; he never spoke in tongues; he couldn't bend his knees to pray, He didn't say the sinner's prayer and he was a thief. Rightly condemned according to his own words. Only Jesus heard his words – heard his cry.

His faith lacked ego, or pretence; it had to. There were no shiny lights, no clever power points or trendy music in this congregation of, well, just one; no fair-trade coffee or nice biscuits after the service here; no sense of mission or outreach – no grasp of canon law whatsoever.

He had nothing, nothing to offer other than his belief that Jesus was who He said He was.

The thief, like Jesus himself, was just a naked dying man on a cross unable to even fold his hands and beg. And yet...and yet,

But For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever BELIEVES in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

As I say I was paraphrasing, but there is something here that challenges us all.

Jesus didn't take away the thief's pain, or his own; he didn't heal the thief's body, or his own; he didn't smite those who had nailed the thief to the cross; he didn't smite his own enemies; – and, yet it was this thief to whom Jesus opened the doors of his kingdom first.

The thief looked at a man just like him; naked, stripped of everything, condemned to hang on a cross and be destroyed by everything humans could throw at him. When everything around that thief, everyone around him, when his own dying breath, told him Jesus was a lie. He believed. He believed.

Stripped naked, literally, with nothing, that man was closer to God than perhaps any person has ever been before or since.

Such a shame John deals with him in a single sentence.

This man – stripped to nothing by the justice, the injustice of the world he found himself in, in that heart breaking nothingness, he - saw - God.

So Good Friday – a time for stripping back.

When things are stripped back what do we see?

We can get so caught up in our lives can't we; – in our worldly goods, as we like to call them, our things, our 'stuff', that we think that is who we are.

Our jobs, our dreams, our stuff, our status, even our words, our sense of self that we project onto the world, – they are all important, yes, they are – but we can lose any of them. Any time.

We hide behind stuff, a new car, a holiday, work, something or other, we hide behind words, bluster, I'm ok, I'm fine when I'm not; we hide behind status; it's not for others to know how I am, that's my business, I have to be strong; we hide our vulnerabilities in all manner of ways, but sooner or later, life chucks a curved ball and we lose what was hiding us.

When things are stripped back, what do we see?

We live in a world that encourages us and enables us to hide from that question so easily. So easily.

Ask the thief on the cross

God is left.

If we lose everything, what is left?

Do we turn away from God and say, if you were real, this wouldn't happen, like one thief, or do we turn to God and say, like the penitent thief, now all is gone I see at last what is real. God, hanging on a cross, defamed and seemingly destroyed by the world, saying simply, this is not the end but the beginning.

Amen