

**First Presbyterian Church  
Marianna, Florida  
Lenten Luncheon March 6, 2012  
Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross:  
“Today, you will be with Me in Paradise”  
Meditation by Huw Christopher, Pastor**

**Hymn page 44**      “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom”

**Prayer:**

Leader: Jesus said, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

**Unison:      As we hear these words of Jesus from the cross, help us, O God, to hear these words as his promise to us.**

Leader: As we remember the promise of Jesus to remember us when he comes into his kingdom,

**Unison:      help us, O God, to live even now as members of your kingdom, reflecting the ways of that kingdom in all that we do, for we ask these things in his name. Amen.**

**Scripture Reading**

**Luke 23:39-43**

Leader: One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding Jesus and saying,

**People:      "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"**

Leader: But the other rebuked him, saying,

**People:      "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."**

Leader: Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

**People:      Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."**

**Lenten Meditation:**

A Criminal Reflects on the Words of Jesus  
“Today you will be with me in Paradise”

It just was not fair. Certainly I felt that way. I knew that I had done wrong, but so many times I had gotten away with it as I had stolen from the rich in order to take care of my family. It just was not fair that I had been caught and was being punished

while so many who were doing the same things, and even worse, were getting off scot free. It just was not fair. How were my family going to survive without me, and why in the world should I have to suffer in this cruel way and give up my life just for the small crimes I had committed. It was not as if I had committed murder like that Barabbas who was set free by Pilate. It was just not fair.

As bad as I felt, though, I felt even worse for that One who hung there beside me. All I had heard about this Jesus of Nazareth was that he had done good and had talked about loving other people and helped so many with his miracles. It just did not seem fair that he was suffering in the same way as I was. Even as I looked at him it was clear that he had been treated even worse than I or my fellow-criminal had been treated. Clearly he was not just being made to suffer the cruel death of crucifixion like the two of us but he had also been beaten. I could see the marks of the whip on his back as they laid him on the cross. Then there is that crown that they placed on his head. I could see the blood coming down his face from those prickly thorns. Now with his arms stretched out and nailed to the cross he could not even wipe his eyes as the blood trickles down into them. It was just not fair that people would treat another human being in such a degrading and inhumane way.

I had witnessed a few crucifixions of some of my friends. I had stood away at a distance so that the Roman authorities would not get suspicious that I might share a common trade with those criminals. Mostly such events did not create much attention and were pretty quiet affairs. Unfortunately they had become such common events here in Jerusalem that people had come to accept them as part of the way of life. But today is so different. I knew that all of this crowd was not for my fellow-criminal and myself. I can hardly see any of our families or friends here. Clearly it is this man on the center cross who is causing all of the commotion. It was just not fair that even after treating him cruelly and hanging him on a cross to die they cannot let him die in peace. As if the physical pain he is enduring along with me was not bad enough there is all that mental and emotional anguish they are putting him through as they jeer at him and mock him,

suggesting that they will believe in him if only he would come down from the cross. It is just not fair that people would treat anyone in such a manner.

Then I heard it. The noise was not coming from the ground this time. It was coming from the cross on the other side of him. It was my fellow-criminal even as he struggled for breath using his last breaths to join in the taunts against this one on the middle cross as he tried to use him for his own ends as he said to him, "**Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!**"

It was just not fair, and I had had as much as I could take. Even, though, I was struggling for breath as I hung there I could not let him get away with this so I gasped for breath and shouted out at him, "**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.**" I am not sure that I had really thought too much about God most of my life and certainly had thought more about doing what I wanted than what God might want me to do. But as I heard others say maybe as people face the reality of death they begin to think more about their relationship with their maker and how their maker may want to treat them after death. My friend may not have been ready to face his maker but I wanted to remind him of his predicament before he tried to take unfair advantage of the man on the middle cross.

I really do not know what it was that prompted me to turn then to that man on the center cross and to say, "**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" I am not sure what I was asking. I had heard that he had spoken about the Kingdom of God so may be if as the people were suggesting he was the Son of God he would not simply forget me but could put in a good word for me.

The fact that in his own pain and weakness he would even respond to me was pretty amazing but what he said was even more surprising as he said, "**Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.**" I wish I had had the strength to ask him what he meant but I was just too weak. As I hung there dying, though, I kept running his

words over in my mind, “today you will me with me in paradise.” Wow! Is it possible that as one who is guilty of the crimes for which I am being punished I could possibly be there with him who was so good and so innocent? It just does not seem to be fair!

I had asked just be remembered in his kingdom but now he has told me that even today I will be with him in paradise. I do not know exactly what he means but certainly it sounds like far more than I could ever have expected and certainly far, far more than I deserve. It just does not seem to be fair that anyone would want to treat me in such a way. Indeed, I have never known anyone who has ever treated me with such generosity and kindness. Is it possible that this is what it means to be part of the kingdom of God of which he had spoken? As unfair as it might seem I wonder is this how God my maker wants to treat me? If this is indeed how God wants to treat me, I wonder how many people will want to say, “it was just not fair”?

**“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”** As you have heard the words of Jesus to criminal dying on the cross beside him how often have you felt like him, “it was just not fair?” Does God want to treat people who experience death bed conversions like this man as he treats those who have sought faithfully to serve him throughout their lives? How fair do we feel such a God to be?

The request of that man, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” prompts us to think why would Jesus want to remember anyone of us? What has anyone of us done to deserve a place in the kingdom of God?

What does it mean to be fair in God’s sight? One of the resources that I have been using for our reflections during Lent this year suggests what so many people consider to be fair. Rich Cleveland writes, “Contrary to popular belief, our eternal destiny is not determined by a scale weighing our good deeds against the many wrongs we have committed. In this line of thinking, if the good outweighs the bad, we go to heaven, and if the bad outweighs the good, we go to hell.” Against such popular thought of what so many people would consider to be fair he goes on to say, “Pope John Paul II reminded us of the teaching from the Second Vatican Council that, ‘Christians owe their

distinguished status not to their own merits but to Christ's special grace.' Our destiny is dependent on Jesus Christ and his mercy and grace." (*Rich Cleveland in "The Seven Last Words of Christ" 2002 The Word Among Us Press*)

Years prior to the Second Vatican Council Charles Wesley had proclaimed the same truth in a hymn which our choir loves to sing as an anthem. His hymn may well have been based on the words of this criminal from the cross when he says to his fellow-criminal, **"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."** When Charles Wesley thinks about what is fair in his hymn he pictures all of us as being like those men on the cross, prisoners under the condemnation of God but then he goes on to be able to proclaim that because of God's amazing love in Jesus Christ,

No condemnation now I fear, I am my Lord's and He is mine;

Alive in Him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine.

In another stanza of that hymn which is not found in the version we will sing today we find him affirming,

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose went forth and followed Thee.

It just was not fair. As we hear that comment from the criminal on the cross beside Jesus we are prompted to look at our own lives and to ask, "Do we want God to treat us fairly based on what we have done or failed to do, or do we want God to treat us with amazing love, and grace and mercy?" I would invite you to think for a moment what hope would you have if God simply treated you fairly and just as you deserve?

(Time of Silence)

As you think about your own response, I would invite you to think of someone you know we needs that assurance that God does not treat people fairly but with the amazing love shown in Jesus Christ who came to die for them as much as for each one of us.

(Time of Silence)

As we continue this season of Lent I would invite you to take time each day this week to pray for the person you have remembered that he or she may come to experience the amazing love wants to give him or her in Jesus Christ.

**Prayer:**

Leader:

Jesus, one of your last acts of mercy and compassion was to respond to the request of a criminal by opening paradise to him. Just a few hours earlier as you shared your last meal with your disciples, you gave your body and blood to help them, and each one of us, to remember you, and your desire to live in them, and in us. As you washed their feet you reminded them, and us, of the ways of your kingdom, and that we can show that we are part of your kingdom as we seek to serve others in your name.

**Unison:**

**Jesus, show me how I can pass on your mercy to others, especially to my loved ones ---- perhaps by an affirming and caring word, or by a willingness to accept and serve others. Let me recognize and be a vehicle for your mercy, not just to the familiar faces of family and friends, but also to the rebellious, the outcast, the lonely, and the needy. Help me to share your mercy and love with others, and let it fuel their hunger for you and their desire to be remembered in your kingdom, for I ask these things in your name and for your sake. Amen.**

*(based on the prayer by Rich Cleveland in "The Seven Last Words of Christ" 2002 The Word Among Us Press)*

**Hymn page 38**

“And Can It Be?”

All three stanzas and refrain