

I would imagine that over the last 2,000 years, millions of sermons have been preached about the thief on the cross. And we have St. Luke to thank for this. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus was crucified between two robbers, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy and Jesus' own words. They even tell us that both robbers mocked Jesus. But St. Luke gives us the rest of the story. He reports what happened to one of these criminals. And few stories are as beautiful.

Yet it did not start out that way. This criminal hurt many people during his life. He robbed from others. He took what he wanted, leaving victims in his wake. I wonder how many times he heard the words, "There is a special place in hell waiting for you!" And certainly, by the way he lived, no one would have guessed otherwise, that he would be spending eternity in heaven. In fact, it's very likely that if certain ones knew this, they would have been angered. "What do you mean, this criminal is going to heaven? You cannot be serious! He deserves to go to hell for his wretched life!"

Yet, according to the accusing Law of God, who doesn't deserve to go to hell? Criminals or not, adulterers and murderers or not, in the eyes of the government, before God's Law we are all robbers, thieves, adulterers, and murderers. For to sin in one point is to break every Commandment.

Now some might say that this particular criminal was lucky that he was crucified next to Jesus. Luck had nothing to do with it. So was the other criminal. He was on the other side of Jesus, yet there is no word from St. Luke that he went to heaven.

No one who goes to heaven is lucky. God's grace places us there. And it was God's grace that placed this criminal on a cross next to Jesus. The worst day in this thief's life became the most glorious and blessed of all days.

At first, he mocked Jesus. But that changed. The Holy Spirit closed his mouth and opened his ears to what Jesus was saying. He was a king, this one. They were mocking Him for being a king. The King of the Jews were the words above His crown-thorned head. But what king would take this abuse from his subjects? Jesus uttered no curses upon them. Instead, He prayed for them. "*Father,*" He prayed, "*forgive them.*"

Through Jesus' gracious words, this thief, while hanging on his cross, became a believer. He believed that he deserved the punishment he was receiving. He was repentant. But even more, He believed that Jesus could save him. Not from death by crucifixion as the other thief wanted from Jesus, but save him from eternal death in hell. "*Jesus,*" he said, "*remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*"

This thief believed that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. And he believed that Jesus was a king of mercy toward sinners, even towards criminals like him. "*When You come into Your kingdom...remember me.*" Jesus turned this thief's "*when*" into "*today.*" "*Today,*" He said, "*you shall be with Me in Paradise.*" Not, "you might be with Me." No. "You will be with Me!" Jesus left no room for doubt. "*Today...you will be with Me in Paradise.*"

Oh, the pure joy that filled this thief's heart! The tears would have been flowing from his eyes, tears of joy. His life of sin was completely erased with these words of Jesus. Nothing in his past could keep him out of heaven. He was going there today! He would be in Jesus' heavenly kingdom today!

We know nothing about this thief. We don't know his name. We know nothing about his family, about his mom and dad. Yes, he had a mom and a dad. Were they there beneath the cross watching him die to say good-bye? And if so, did they hear Jesus' words to their son? Were tears of joy flowing from their eyes as well?

The Holy Spirit, through St. Luke, tells us all we need to know about this thief. He is in heaven with Jesus. But this speaks the Gospel to us in a most wonderful way. If this man is in heaven, there is hope for all. No one is too wretched for Jesus. No one has sinned too much, or too greatly, that they are disqualified.

I wonder how many thieves are in heaven today because of Jesus' word to this thief. How many adulterers are in heaven because Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery? How many murderers are in heaven because Saul, who murdered Christians, was forgiven by Jesus and called to be His apostle?

God's grace is more than enough for every sinner. It's more than enough for you. And His grace covers you. It covers your past. All your sins it covers with the blood of Jesus. You are baptized in that cleansing blood. And the same word Jesus gave the thief is His word to you in your baptism, that you will be with Him in Paradise. He gives you no room for doubt. He does not say, "If you do this or that." No. He gives heaven to you in your baptism just as He gave heaven to the thief. And no one can take it from you. No sin that you do can disqualify you. All your sin is forgiven. Be at peace. Have joy in your heart. Jesus' promise of Paradise is for you. Amen.