

## Luke 23:27-43

What is this...Lent in November? Jesus on the cross, the two thieves--this is the Scripture Reading for Holy Week. So is next Sunday going to be the Reading for Easter? Close...it's the Palm Sunday Reading; the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. But that's because the same story is read for the First Sunday in Advent. No this is not Holy Week. It's the week of Thanksgiving Day; the Last Sunday of the Church Year. The end times are upon us. This is our theme. Christ returning to judge the world as our God and King.

So why this Reading from Luke 23? Why not some other Scripture where Jesus speaks of the final days, or where He speaks of His judging and ruling? Our Collect this morning says it well. We prayed, "Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of your cross." We can search the Bible from cover to cover and nowhere do we see Jesus depicted as our King better than when He is on the cross. Not in Genesis where He is active in creation. Not on the Mount of Transfiguration where His glory shines like the sun. Not in Revelation where He holds in His strong hand the keys of death and Hades. The crown which portrays Jesus as King best of all is the crown of thorns...and one thief, in his dying hours, came to understand that.

That man, although he could see Jesus with his eyes, had to live by faith, not by sight, because Jesus most certainly did not look like a king. For one thing, kings live in palaces; they do not hang from crosses. Kings wear royal robes; they do not wear blood and sweat and the marks of whips. The hands of kings hold scepters; they are not nailed down to a splintery two-by-four. Kings are hailed, not mocked. Their subjects shout, "Long live the king!" not "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

With all that his eyes could take in, that thief did not see a king when he looked at Jesus. And that's why, at first, he with his partner in crime, mocked Him. That's why he joined in with the soldiers and the Chief Priests in poking fun at the Man upon the center cross. But along with giving this thief a pair of eyes, God also gave him a pair of ears. And when Jesus spoke, he listened. He listened when Jesus returned love for hatred. He listened to Jesus say, "Father, forgive them..." And as he listened, within his heart God was at work. And before long he was confessing Jesus as his victorious King. "Jesus," he prayed, "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

No such words came from the other thief. Words did flow out of his mouth, but they were words of contempt. He had only hours to live, but he was not about to repent. He would never surrender. He would remain proud, bitter, and judgmental to the very end. He was a man's man. A man other thieves and criminals could look up to and hail. He had no use for church, religion, Sacraments, or pastors. He did not care what Jesus had to say. When the church bells rang, he always had something better to do. When the Pastor and Elders came to visit, he was always too busy to listen. This thief felt only disgust for his partner in crime. What a wuss! A weakling! Asking Jesus to remember him. He was acting like a three-year-old! Real men bow to no one. Real men gut it out, even unto death. Let his partner in crime go crawling to Jesus. He was not about to give in.

Here we have, in full view before us, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The sheep on Jesus' right hand; the goats on His left. The sheep repentant of their sins; the goats not so repentant. To the sheep Jesus says, "Come, blessed by My Father...Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." To the goats, no such words. But they will be locked out of heaven's joys.

Now had we said to the thief on Jesus' right, "Do you know that you are a sheep?" he would have been confused. "A sheep? Me? One of Jesus' sheep? But I'm nothing but a thief!" But friends, that

is the mark of a sheep. They do not have an air of superiority about them. They are repentant. They are not "holier-than-thou." They know they deserve nothing good from God. Yet, they cling to Jesus. They follow Jesus because they are His sheep. They listen to His words and they live by His words. This thief was brutally honest. "We are getting what we deserve," he said. But then he turned to Jesus and his faith cried, "Now, Lord, give me what I do not deserve...Remember me in Your kingdom."

To the goat on His left, Jesus said nothing. Was He angry toward him? No. He was dying for him. He loved him. But that man was a goat. He refused to confess his wrongs. He refused to listen to Jesus' words with a heart of faith. He received only silence from Jesus on the cross, but on the Last Day he will hear these awful words, "Depart from Me, you accursed one!"

Now if that first thief could be brutally honest, then so should we. Let me speak honestly with you. I'm looking at a bunch of thieves today...and so are you. I'm looking at murderers...and so are you. I'm looking at adulterers...and so are you. Not one of us has kept God's Commandments. We have failed...miserably. We are no better than those two men hanging next to Jesus. Either we are sheep or we are goats, but either way, sheep or goats, both are sinful through and through.

The difference between sheep and goats is not that sheep live better lives than goats live. The thief who repented was just as guilty as his partner. Maybe he was even worse. Perhaps he stole more, cursed more, hated more. It did not matter to Jesus. That could have been Osama Bin Laden hanging there...Jesus would have forgiven him. That thief was a sheep because, yes he was sorry for his sins-- he was repentant, and for this simple reason: he clung to Jesus. When Jesus said, "Father, forgive them..." he said, "Those words are for me."

And these words, friends, are for you. All that is done here is for you. The Law's accusations you hear are for you, to drive you to repentance over your sins. The gracious words of Jesus you hear are for you. His Sacraments are for you. It is not for me this day to separate the sheep from the goats. Jesus as Judge will do that on the Last Day. It is for me to point all of you to Him who hangs on the center cross, and to say, "He died for you, dear sinner." And it does not matter how great a thief you have been; how big of an adulterer; how terrible a murderer. Thieves, adulterers, murderers, and all such wicked sinners go to heaven when they cling to Jesus. Jesus says so. "Today," He told that thief, "You will be with Me in Paradise."

It would be nice, I think, if that thief on the cross had a name. Well, you know something? He does have a name! The name of the thief on the cross is Jesus. That's right...Jesus. We do not know the names of the two men on either side of Him, but the thief hanging from the cross in the center is Jesus. Did He ever steal? No. Did He even covet what was not His? No. But Jesus hung there as a thief, and as a murderer, and as an adulterer; He hung there as a sinner. "He who knew no sin became sin for us." Was that man on Jesus' right a thief? No. He used to be a thief, but now he looked by faith to his Savior. God punished Jesus in his place. That man entered Paradise a saint. Not a thief, but a forgiven child of God because Jesus became the thief that he had been.

And also for you my sinful friends. Whatever sins of your past bother you, look to Him who hangs from the center cross. Your wrongs are charged to Him. He is your Substitute. God punished Jesus for you. You are forgiven. And because you are His sheep, you believe this. You do not close your ears to Jesus' words like the other thief did. You listen to Jesus. You cling to Him. You follow Him. When you sing, "Crown Him with Many Crowns," you love Him for being your King. But you are glad most of all that He was crowned with thorns for you; that He, your King, died for you.

My fellow sheep, when the Last Day comes and your King returns in Judgment, you will not cry out in terror to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" But you will look with joy upon your King and hear Him say, "Today, you shall be with Me in Paradise." Why do I know this? Because you look to your King today. Because you follow Him today. You do not turn away from His words as the other thief did. You hear His words. You cling to His promises. You are Jesus' forgiven ones. You are His sheep today, and so you will be His sheep on the Last Day. Amen.