

Sermon for Zion, March 31, 2019 – Lent 4

Hymns: 358 – There Is A Redeemer; We Will Glorify; Amazing Grace / My Chains Are Gone; 352 - And Can It Be

Scripture: John 19:16-18; Mark 15:27-32; Luke 23:39-43

Sermon Title: St. Dismas (The “Good Thief”)

*John 19:16-18*

*Finally Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.*

*Mark 15:27-32*

*They crucified two rebels with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”*

*Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*

*Luke 23:39-43*

*One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”*

*But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

*Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

I love churches. This may not come as a surprise to you, but I love churches – those buildings marking the life of a Christian community, who pooled their faith, their energies, and their wallets together to establish a place in which they could gather, could worship, could celebrate new life and grieve the passing of old. Wherever I am in the world, I visit all the churches I can, and each one gives me an insight into how the people of that community and time thought about and worshipped God.

So it makes me sad when I see a church close, and I was particularly sad when I visited my home town of Kingston, Ontario, and saw the “Closed” sign on one of my favourite churches – the Church of the Good Thief.

It was a favourite for several reasons. First of all, it was pretty – it still is pretty – built of Kingston limestone, standing atop a hill in beautiful grounds, graced by a tall, square tower.

Secondly, even as a kid, I was fascinated by the story of its construction – all the stones were quarried, cut, and transported by the inmates of Kingston Penitentiary, just a kilometre or so down the hill from the church. The inmates were paid 25 cents a day for what was doubtless backbreaking labour. Kingston Pen was notorious for housing the most hardened of criminals, and as a child, I wondered at what they thought of building a church by the sweat of their condemned brows.

Which is how it got its name – “The Church of the Good Thief.” At the time of its construction in 1894, it was the only church in the world which carried that name. Later, a few other churches, also built by inmate labour, adopted that title as well. But it had another name too – St. Dismas. That’s the name which tradition ascribed to the so-called “Good Thief” – the one crucified next to Jesus, who amidst his own suffering and taunting of the crowd, spoke up on Jesus’ behalf.

In most paintings and icons, he is pictured to the right of Jesus, with the other criminal, whom tradition calls Gestas, on the left. That’s Dismas there, in a carving above the door of the Church of the Good Thief; inside the church, though, you’ll look for him in vain. There is a large painting behind the altar of the crucifixion, but with only a single cross; neither Dismas nor Gestas can be seen. I suppose the people of the church wanted to make it clear that the focus should be not upon Dismas, but upon Jesus, and I don’t have an argument with that.

But it is Dismas you see on the way in, right over the door, and I’ve been thinking about his story. Other people have been thinking about it too, long before me, and as a result of some particularly gripping and inventive sermons from imaginative preachers long ago, the following legend developed:

You may recall that Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus left Bethlehem in a rush, to escape the evil King Herod’s murderous intent. While en route to Egypt, they are waylaid by thieves, who threaten the Holy Family. One of the thieves, Dismas, has a change of heart, and pays off the other, Gestas, to leave the Holy

Family alone. The young Jesus indicates that while both robbers will be crucified with him, only one will be welcomed into Paradise.

That's the legend, first put down in print some 500 years or more after the event, and should be regarded more as a fanciful sermon illustration than a historical event. One of the problems with it, and with the name of that fine old Kingston church, is that it identifies the two men crucified with Jesus as "thieves." Which isn't what the Bible actually calls them.

John, who points out that Jesus was crucified in the middle, simply calls them "others." Both Mark and Matthew use the word "lystas," which is better understood as "brigand." "Kleptos" is the Greek word for "thief," where we get the word "kleptomaniac." "Lystas" is better understood as "plunderer;" someone who foments societal or political unrest for their own gain; this is why many translations, such as the NIV, use "rebel." "Bandits," says the NRSV. "Outlaws," say others. "Revolutionaries," say a few. This makes sense, because Romans didn't crucify robbers. Rebels, revolutionaries, outlaws, or those who cause unrest against the State, were subject to crucifixion. That's why Jesus was crucified; he was accused of treason against Caesar, for claiming to be a King. Luke stays out of the discussion, calling the two others, "kakourgoi;" literally "malefactors," "criminals," or "those with an attitude of evil."

What is important to remember, whether or not we call him Dismas or The Good Thief or the Rebel or Malefactor or Criminal, is that this was a person, a flesh and blood person, whose life and decisions and actions had led them to this horrible and nightmarish end, the worst possible end, and that he finds himself, on Passover Eve, crucified with two others, with a fast-closing future promising only torment and despair.

And it is Luke, who has a soft spot for hard cases – think Prodigal Son, think Good Samaritan, think Centurion supervising the whole grisly affair, who himself says, "Surely, this man was the Son of God" – it is Luke who lets us in on more of Dismas' story.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree that as Jesus hung on the cross, his enemies stood around, heaping insults and scorn upon him:

*"So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He*

*saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”*

Both Matthew and Mark add, *“Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.”* It is hard to hear, and painful to try to imagine, that not only was Jesus suffering so terribly physically, but in his physical torment, was also further humiliated by the scorn and contempt of others. Even the criminals crucified with him joined in; everyone, it seems, likes to have someone to look down upon.

But for Luke, there’s something else going on too. Listen again, as the New Living Translation tells it:

*One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”*

*But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”*

It’s an amazing moment. The first criminal sees only the hopelessness of his own situation, his own pain, and he lashes out at Jesus, as he doubtless lashed out at all the other people in his life. We know people like that; people who seem able only to react to adversity with hostility, who can see even in those who love them a distorted reflection of their own anger.

But the other man, Dismas; somehow, he managed to see something different. He saw himself for who he truly was. He saw Jesus, for who Jesus truly is. And he placed his life – his past, his present, his future - in Jesus’ hands.

Dismas saw himself for who he truly was. He was finished with excuses, with self-justification. Throughout his life, he likely blamed the Romans for all his troubles, or his parents, or his socioeconomic situation, or his unlucky breaks, or his friends who led him astray, or, or, or. It was always someone else’s fault. Someone other than him. But now, at the end, he sees himself for what he is. The blaming is over. The finger points back at himself. *“We deserve to die for our crimes,”* he says. I have no one to blame but myself.

Dismas ends the circle of blame. He takes responsibility for who he is, for what he’s done, for where his life has brought him. He is no-one’s fault but his

own. And it seems to me, that's a moment to which all of us must one day come; the moment when we take responsibility for ourselves, for our actions; we must, in a moment of clarity, of revelation, see ourselves for who we really are, and realise just how short we fall of the expectation of others, of ourselves, of God; that we just can't make it on our own. We need help; we need hope; we need love.

The next moment is equally important. The first criminal sees Jesus as one more empty answer, one more false hope, one more false promise. Messiah? How could this poor wretch, crucified and dying, possibly be the Messiah? What kind of pipe dream is that? What kind of God, if there is such a thing as God, would put a Messiah through that? If there is a God, he would bail his precious Messiah out of this mess, and me along with it. Messiah? No, this Jesus is just a man. It's a delusion. There's no hope there.

But the other man, Dismas; somehow, he managed to see something different. He saw Jesus, for who Jesus truly is. Somehow, somehow, through the red mist of his own pain and despair, he saw Jesus clearly, caught a glimpse of the Messiah in the crucified man, recognised Jesus as the sinless, blameless Son of God, who was dying undeserved, dying somehow not for what he had done, but for what others had done to him; more, Jesus was dying for what all of us had done. He had taken upon himself not his own sins, of which there were none; he had carried to the cross nothing less than the sins of the world. Your sins. Mine. The sins of Dismas, crucified beside him.

*“Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong.”*

The next moment is the most important moment of all. Dismas not only saw himself for who he truly was. He not only saw Jesus, for who Jesus truly is. He took that next step. Despite the hopelessness of his situation, he placed his life – his past, his present, his future - in Jesus' hands. *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”*

Jesus, you are the Messiah. Jesus, you are the Son of God. Jesus, you are bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to pass. Jesus, remember me. Remember me. Don't let this life be my only story. Don't let this death end who I am. Remember me. Take me as yours. Bring me with you. Bring me home. *“Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”* Remember me.

Dismas – finally - saw himself for who he truly was. Dismas saw Jesus, for who Jesus truly is. And he placed his life – his past, his present, his future - in Jesus' hands.

And Jesus' reaction? Did he say, "Too late, Dismas, you should have made your mind up before now." Did he say, "Sorry, Dismas, you've lived a terrible life, and you're only getting what you deserve." Did he say, "Dismas, there's nothing you can possibly do to make up for all the wrong you've done. You'll never be good enough for my kingdom. You have to earn your forgiveness. Too bad, Dismas. Too bad for you."

No. That's not what Jesus said. What Jesus said was, "*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" It isn't too late, Dismas. You are forgiven. I will never turn you away. I know you. I love you. I will remember you. "*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.*"

We are all Dismas. We all need to see ourselves for who we truly are. We all need to see Jesus for who Jesus truly is. And we all need to place our lives – forgiveness for our past, help for our present, hope for our future – in Jesus' hands. It is never too late. And if you would ask Dismas – whose name, incidentally, means "the setting of the sun," which is to say, "the running out of time;" Dismas would tell you, the time to do that is now. Don't waste a moment; the time to come to Jesus, the time to place your life in his hands, your past for forgiveness, your present for help, your future for hope, is now. Now. "It is never too late; Don't waste this moment; the time to come to Jesus is now."

That's the true story of Dismas, that's the real message; That's why we call him "Saint Dismas;" the Good Thief: "It is never too late; Don't waste this moment; the time to come to Jesus is now." Thanks be to God. Amen.