

Making Fit for Paradise

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Proper 29 (Year C, Luke 23:33-43)

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In our gospel reading today, three different sorts of people rail against Jesus. Theirs are the same mocking cries directed at our Lord in every generation. The Jewish leaders mock his claim to be God's Anointed, the Messiah. The Roman soldiers mock his claim to be king. He certainly looks little like either — Christ or king — up there on the Cross.

But then there is the deriding cry of the first criminal, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us?" This cry goes up in every generation, every day. It's the scream of the suffering, those longing — even demanding — that God fix it, even though there is precious little to suggest that's what Jesus promised to do, and abundant evidence, in fact, that he refused to make suffering go away in his own life.

"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us?" Is this not also the cry of those who stare at the world's pain and find it impossible to reconcile with a good God. You know these people — those whose faith has been eroded away by the constant torrent of pain which the world has inflicted. They may not ever suffocate strung up on a cross like the criminal, but their faith in Jesus is similarly snuffed out by his refusal to save himself, and us.

It's heartbreaking to hear these cries. To watch people walk out the doors of the church, turning their back to the cross on which Jesus is saving himself and us. It's heartbreaking that some turn their backs on love because love isn't power.

For that's the issue, isn't it, for the leaders, the soldiers, even the first criminal? They demand Jesus control them, rather than love them. And if you don't see their cries as a demand that he take control, just imagine the scene if Jesus had come down from the Cross.

Refusing to die — think Superman bouncing bullets off his chest or Neo dodging bullets in the Matrix — is always a prelude to a butt kicking.

I hope you'll forgive the phrase, because most of the time, at the heart of the matter, that's the issue for us too. When we're upset with God, it's because we want a butt kicking Jesus, and the one we have got his butt kicked.

Jesus doesn't respond to any of them — leaders, soldiers, or criminals. He just went about his business of dying on the Cross, replacing the idol of power before whom the world makes prostrations with the true God who loves us to the end.

But then there is the second criminal. He says something very different, speaking first to the first criminal. Verse 41: "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." The second criminal makes, as it were, his confession. He acknowledges "deeds" for which condemnation has been a just punishment.

But look at this fascinating thing that happens. Because of the way the narrative works in Luke, because he is responding to the first criminal, the second criminal's confession is plural. He speaks not only for himself, but for the other criminal.

More than that — and I have every belief this is intentional on Luke's part — he says more than he means. What the second criminal says is true of all of us. He "gets it" — and in so doing he articulates not just his own plight, but our common human plight. *We* are under a sentence of condemnation, and *we* indeed have been condemned justly, for *we* are getting what *we* deserve for our deeds. What *we* get, of course, is death. As Paul says in chapter 6 of Romans: "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23).

Silent when the religious leaders derided him; silent when the soldiers mocked him; silent when the first criminal railed against him. But now Jesus speaks.

"He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:43).

Truly I tell you, this is a strange response. This is the only time in all the gospels Jesus ever uses the word 'Paradise,' which is not even a Hebrew, or Aramaic, or Greek word. The word is Persian (in Biblical terms, it's Babylonian), and it's transliterated into the ancient Biblical languages. Which means it's like "taco," a Spanish word that we use in English as is, rather than translating it into "tortilla sandwich."

As is the case with basically all of the Biblical descriptions of the afterlife, things only get more complicated from here. In Persian, the word simply means a garden, not like your front-yard flower bed, but something like the Arboretum in Dallas, or the Tuilleries in Paris.

This is the root of our common usage of the term to describe any verdant, tropical sun-drenched land filled with bikini-babes and bald-chested muscle-men and drinks with tiny umbrellas. But if this is what we mean when we talk about a

heavenly paradise, then we've missed something. And though I'm absolutely sure the criminal dying on the cross that afternoon would have been profoundly pleased to find himself laying on the beach with a bikini-babe and a piña colada, that's not quite what Jesus was talking about.

In the ancient world, through a historical and linguistic process whose detailed explanation would do precious little to further the proclamation of the gospel, the word 'paradise' became associated with the Biblical Garden of Eden, the garden with the Tree of Life at its center. We know this most famously in the English language with Milton's work *Paradise Lost*, but the association of paradise and Eden was already firmly established in Jesus' time.

There was a belief in the ancient world that Eden, and so Paradise, was now the heavenly rather than the earthly realms. And that in the center of it was the Tree of Life, just like the story in Genesis. In the Bible, we hear this most clearly in Revelation, where Christ's message for the church in Ephesus reads, "To everyone who conquers, I will get permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God."

But paradise is not just a simply synonym for heaven. See, in Genesis, the story about Paradise, about Eden, is that human beings could only live there as long as they lived without sin. Once Adam and Eve eat of the apple, they're kicked out. So one way to define paradise is the place where you can only live fully in accordance with the will of God. It is a place without sin, where our "deeds" to use the term of the second criminal, never get in the way of our relationship with God.

So Paradise is not just a garden, or tropical pleasure land, or an idyllic state of innocence. It's a place without sin, and so it's not at all the sort of place the second criminal deserves to be.

So when Jesus uses the word "Paradise" rather than "heaven" brings this whole complex of ideas around deeds and misdeeds into the light of that day on the hillside at Golgotha. The criminal asked to be remembered by Jesus when he came into his kingdom. And in response, Jesus promised him Paradise. He didn't say, "Today you will be with me in my kingdom." He said Paradise, because at least here, in this pivotal moment, the quality of Jesus kingdom that he most wanted to emphasize was that Paradise quality — where everything is right between God and man.

We can imagine Jesus having come down and slaying the soldiers and lead worship as high priest in the Temple. But there is no more powerful act of kingly authority that Jesus could have exercised that afternoon than taking a common criminal and putting him in Paradise.

I get the agenda for the McKinney Planning and Zoning Commission in my email, and each month I read through the agenda and the associated requests and presentations and plats. To be approved, the proposed structures and use must match the zoning of the land, and or the zoning must be changed.

Paradise is zoned “no sin.” No bad deeds.

Hanging there on the Cross, Jesus wasn’t promising to re-zone Paradise. Jesus, as King, was promising to remake the criminal, make him fit for Paradise.

This is an act of enormous authority. To take what was irretrievably broken about us and make it right is not the act of some wimpy, puny, pretend-King. It is, in fact, nothing short of an act of God. And it happened because Jesus died on the cross.

The word "today" in Jesus' statement, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," is in reference to the day of Jesus' death, not the criminals. We, on this side of Jesus death on the cross, have access to Jesus' making fit for Paradise power right now, in this life.

We say, rightly, that Jesus died for our sins. But what killed him isn’t really your meanness to your parents, looking at porn, the lie about your coworker, or even your failure in prayer and scripture reading. What killed Jesus, the reason he died, is that we as human beings value other things more than God. Jesus was killed by the idols of politics, pride, tribe, and religion, those petty warring gods that we make for ourselves. Jesus, despite the cries and taunts and challenges of the priests and soldiers and first criminal, was unwilling to become the most powerful idol.

That’s mostly what we want out of Jesus, for him to be our most powerful idol. We want Jesus to rule over politics, pride, tribes, and religion, to make those things secondary. But Jesus wants them gone. He’s not interested in those things being members of his divine administration. Paul didn’t say, “There is Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free...but first comes Jesus.” Paul said, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

On the cross, Jesus took the burden of our idols onto himself, literally crushing his own life. And then buried those idols. And then rose victorious over them.

Jesus won’t to change who he is, but rather who we are. Christ the King doesn’t promise to control us, he promises to re-make us. Not chains, but change. Not victory parades, but victory in Paradise. Amen.