

**Good Friday Reflection 2011**

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

Today we stand in a way that, in our tradition, is more than merely figuratively at the foot of the cross on which they crucified our Savior. Our gospel reading today, from John's gospel is very austere in the way it treats the actual crucifixion. You certainly don't get the sense of despair and abandonment as depicted in Mark's gospel, for example. If you think back to Mel Gibson's famous treatment of Jesus' end, with its emphasis on pain and suffering, you'll see how much less dire John's portrait of it is.

Here in this gospel there is very little said about the two men crucified with Jesus; there is, in fact, but a brief, almost passing, remark that Jesus is being crucified between two others, one on either side. Both Matthew and Luke report in addition, however, that both of these others are criminals, and that whereas one of them derides Jesus, the other rebukes that man, observing that they at least deserve their fate whereas Jesus has done nothing to deserve this humiliating death: "...[We] indeed have been condemned justly," he says, "for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he beseeches Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom – to which comes the response: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

"Today you will be with me in Paradise." Wouldn't we all like to hear those words from our Savior? O.K., maybe not today, but someday.... Well, take heart. Deep in the stillness at the center of our consciousness, if we listen attentively, we *can* hear them, this very day, even as we stand here at the foot of *his* cross, not of our own.

Think back to an earlier time in the story of his ministry. Jesus was castigated for eating with sinners and tax collectors – folks considered far less worthy than those who were esteemed for their religiosity. So one of the most powerful stories of the many that Jesus told answered those charges. There were a Pharisee and a tax collector, or publican, who had gone to the temple to pray. The Pharisee, who had been punctilious about the exercise of his religious responsibilities, thanked God that he had been given the strength of character to do what had to be done. Far off, standing on the fringe of the crowd was the tax collector, one of the least thought of in his society – on the fringe because his job made him loathed by one and all – in some respects himself little more than a thief – a man who took from the Jews taxes demanded by the Romans and lived on what extra he could extort for himself. The Pharisee spied him. "Thank God I'm not like that sinner!" he exclaimed. The tax collector's response, though, was certainly unexpected from such as he. It was to admit that he was indeed a sinner, but then to throw himself on God's mercy. And it was he, not the Pharisee, Jesus tells us, who went home justified.

So is it here on this darkest of all days on our calendar. All we know about the person we think of as the good thief is that he hangs on one of those three crosses, but that, unlike the thief on the cross on the other side of Jesus, who, even as he hangs there, participates in mocking our Lord, this man, the good thief, like the tax collector, takes responsibility for the behavior that has landed him on his cross. Turning to Jesus, he pleads, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Thus he throws himself on God's mercy, just as the tax collector had done – to which Jesus responds with that wonderful reassurance: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

The extraordinary French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, once said that, more than any other person in the gospels, it is the good thief whom she envied – not because he was able to share in Jesus' eventual glory, but because he was able to share in his agony, to die at his side. Perhaps she is asking too much of us more ordinary folks, but it is surely a good reminder today of all days, when we are brought to the foot of his cross, that, just as Jesus humbled himself to share our humanity, we also are called to share in his divinity. And, so, as long as we cast our lots with him, as does the good thief, we may truly be with him in paradise. More important, we need not wait for that paradise until some day after our death, for, when we truly link our lives with his, when we die to ourselves and let him work through us, we surely are already *in* paradise with him.

AMEN