

Christ the King, Anglican Church in Zwolle –
Sunday before Advent (November 2016)
Luke 23;v33-43.

On Tuesday, 22nd November, it will 53 years since the assassination of American President John F Kennedy in Dallas. It is striking, that for most famous people when they die, their death is briefly mentioned, or even not even known by the public at large. But for JFK, what so much people know about him actually focuses upon his death and how he died and what happened – film footage, one shooter or two etc. This Sunday is the end of the Church Year, and we look at the end of Jesus life, the hours before his death, nearly 2000 years ago, how he died and what happened and what we learn about his kingship and his kingdom.

Who is the one who hangs on the cross? In the gospel two people reveal his identity. Governor Pilate's tablet hanging above Jesus' head and the second criminal. God's long promised and chosen King is Jesus but he is on the cross.

The Crucifixion is a horrible event – and we think about it near the time we are preparing for Christmas, to help us avoid having a sentimental faith – ‘awhh, baby Jesus born at Christmas’ – and we forget why Jesus came into the world and what it cost to achieve that rescue mission of God. We have an odd sort of King – because he died for us. Most kings would expect us to die for them, to protect them. But Jesus our King, died for us, so we could have eternal life. In his final battle Jesus is obedient to his Father, evil powers try to stop Jesus doing God's will and to sway him from his purpose, but Jesus is faithful to the end. Most sufferers call down curses on their tormentors Jesus prays from the agony of the cross, *‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’*

I want to focus upon the last words Jesus speaks in our passage. *'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'*. He said these to a thief hanging beside him- what had the thief said or done to warrant such words? The thief said to his friend hanging the other side of Jesus: *'Don't you 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'*. Then the thief said to Jesus: *'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom'*.

Now, this year, is the 25th anniversary of the first Indiana Jones movie. I am a great Indiana Jones fan – and one of my treats before the summer, was to watch the first 3 films back to back the Amersfoort cinema was running a film marathon celebrating the anniversary. I did enjoy myself! Anyway, in Indiana Jones and Last Crusade, with Harrison Ford as Indy, but also Sean Connery as his father Henry Jones. They are involved in the chase to get to the Holy Grail – the cup allegedly used by Jesus at the Last Supper – to get to it before the Nazis. They have escaped from Berlin and Indiana's father talks about the challenges they face when they arrive at the Grail's location – challenges he's written down in his diary..

Henry (speaking to Indy): When we get to Alexandretta we will face three challenges. "First, the breath of God. Only the penitent man will pass. Second the Word of God, only in the footsteps of God will he proceed. Third, the Path of God, only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth."

Indy - What does that mean?

Henry: I don't know. We'll find out!"

Later we discover the meanings. The breath of God – only the penitent man can succeed – the importance of kneeling, being humble, being sorrowful. The Word of God – knowing who God is. And third, the leap from a lion’s mouth, a leap of faith. Penitence, knowing God, faith.

We see all three in this criminal hanging beside Jesus. He knows he has lived a wayward a sinful life, he says that he and his colleague in arms deserve their punishment, and he says “*remember me when you come into your kingdom*” - the thief asks for mercy when Jesus becomes King. He sees his life, and he seeks to live a new way. He is *penitent* he repents of how he has lived his life. And he not only knows that Jesus is innocent, but also *that he is King*. Consider what he says: “*Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom*” – he knows Jesus will die on a cross like he will. Yet he will be alive (or come alive again) and he will be king. He *knows* enough that Jesus is more than a man, he knows he is God’s Promised King. Finally *faith* – he asks for mercy, but it is also faith – faith in Jesus that he is King and he is the one with authority to welcome or shut out people from his Kingdom, surely an authority only held by God, yet he has *faith* that Jesus has that authority.

Jesus response to him – “*today you will be with me in paradise*”.

Paradise. The word has Persian roots – meaning the garden where the king walks with his friends in the cool of the evening. King Jesus promises his new friend – not a seat in a throne room, or sitting on a cloud, or everlasting boredom in some misty dream world. Nope, he offers a wonderful thing – eternity in the company of friends, basking in the love and presence of our heavenly King. But that phrase – the garden where the king walks with his friends in the cool of evening, that takes us to the Garden of Eden at the beginning of time in Genesis 3:8 – it says: “*The*

man – Adam – and his wife – Eve – heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” Paradise – the word used here by Luke (the gospel writer) was used in the Greek translation of Genesis for Garden of Eden – so when we think, where is Jesus, where was that thief after he died, we go to the beginning of Genesis for insights. And that is where humanity began and that is where God desires for us to end. So it suggests, when we wonder what is heaven like, where did that thief go when he died, we turn to Garden of Eden for insights. It challenges our view of heaven perhaps. The English writer and theologian CS Lewis in a wonderful quote suggests we need to have a more majestic, more beautiful image of heaven...He suggests that we think of this life as being like term time and heaven as being like the school holidays. He says of people who’ve died: *“The term is over. The holidays have begun. The dream is ended. This is the morning. All their life in this world had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on for ever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.”* (words from the final Chronicles of Narnia novel Final Battle, by CS Lewis)

But what has this thief done to earn this place in this wonderful land? He has done absolutely *nothing*, beyond he has recognized who Jesus is, his own need, and he has reached out to Jesus for help. The kingdom of God – the core message: to be with Jesus to become Jesus friend, it is not about religion, doing lots of good stuff – even though that is good – but becoming Jesus friend, entering that Kingdom, that Paradise for those who die in Christ, it is about faith, repentance and trust. But this niggles us, how can he – this thief on his deathbed - get into Paradise when maybe he spent his whole life in crime or whatever. It just isn’t fair we may think or we may even think, it is wrong.

The early church had problems with this also. The criminal never had a name but they gave him one in the 2nd century - **Dismas**. Not the greatest name I'd suggest but there we go. There was a story – a legend about him –that **Dismas** was a sort of Jewish Robin Hood, stole from the rich gave to the poor. Well – and here is a link to Christmas – when Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus were escaping from King Herod's persecution as he sought to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem, they went to Egypt, and they were attacked by a band of robbers – and Dismas was the captain of that gang and he was so touched by the loveliness of baby Jesus, he told his followers not to lay hands on the baby. And the legend goes on to say Dismas said: 'Blessed child, if ever there comes a time for you to have mercy on me, then remember me and what I have done for you today.'

Nice story but I think it arose because the church writers found it hard to accept that someone by faith alone, after a wasted, criminal life, with no apparent religion, could be welcomed into the kingdom of God. But that is the wonderful scandal of the cross, of the King we worship. All those people, who shouted at Jesus, the religious leaders and soldiers who mocked him, if they had turned to Jesus, he would have willingly accepted them, and said the same words of welcome, as he will always willingly accept everyone who turns to him, regardless of where they are in their stage of life or their background.

Jesus welcomes all, all who turn to him He welcomes.

To finish, I'm going to pray some words...

Jesus, our God and King, we worship you. Jesus you are my King, reign in me and in my home, reign in my life for ever. Jesus remember us when you come into your kingdom. Amen.