

Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise

March 21, 2008

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There was a time in the 1990s, in another Church where the Good Friday Service began at 1:30 PM ending at 3:00 PM. During that hour and a half we had the readings, Psalm 22:1-11, sung to a beautiful and original setting, hymns and meditations on the Seven Last words. Times have changed, but I want to share with you this morning my thoughts on one of those last seven words and it comes from the Gospel of Our Lord according to Luke (23:43), *Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise*. It is doubtful that there is a character in the whole of the New Testament who has been the subject of more speculation and more romancing than this penitent thief who hung in death with Jesus. Actually, all that we know of him is contained in this single incident, recorded only in Luke's Gospel. But, pious legend has given him a name, Dysmas, and pious speculation, endeavoring to find the reason for his eleventh hour discovery of the Christ, has built up a whole lot apocryphal biographies of him.

The fact is that whoever, or whatever he was, so far as history is concerned, he appears only for this one brief and unforgettable

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moment. We don't know what prompted a change of heart on the part of this man who very likely had never so much as seen Jesus until they were led out to die together. But, out of the darkness of Calvary, we hear his unforgettable request, *Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

Our Lord's reply is usually interpreted to mean that it is never too late to turn to him in faith and repentance. Down to the end of the end, down to life's last breath, the possibility of paradise is there for all who will repent and believe. If this second word from the Cross says anything at all, it says that with Jesus Christ there is never a *too late*. He hadn't asked for any special favor. He hadn't asked for forgiveness for the life he had led. His simple request was that he not be forgotten. *Lord remember me.* It was a modest request, but listen to the response!

*Todaywith me in Paradise. Not, *I'll remember you;* not, *I'll remember you when,* but *Today! Today* you will be with me. I'll not only remember you, I'll take you with me. Nothing about immortality of the soul, or the spirits of the departed. *Today....with me.**

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I emphasize this because I believe that here is not a peculiar incident standing by itself, but one, which is just as applicable to us as to the thief on the Cross. Most of us would have to admit to a certain poverty in our own spiritual lives. We do not always have the triumphant faith, the victorious love, the invincible courage, the undying hope we want to have, no matter how **hard** we try. Perhaps we don't expect enough. We underestimate what God can do and what God is **willing** to do.

Ask to be remembered and you gain Paradise??!! We dare such little hope as will never make us disappointed. God answers us, not by the measure of our asking, but by the measure of his magnificence. Unhappily, most of us know him, not by the measure of His magnificence, but by the measure of our timidity and skepticism. We haven't even begun to realize what possibilities there are for us in God.

When we do see what there is for us, we often look upon God's gifts as becoming ours in the far off and distant future and the

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penitent thief shared our thinking. “Lord, remember be *when.....*no telling when that might be, or when he thought it would be, but he didn’t expect it to be soon, if for no other reason than that crucified day-dreamers do **not** overnight become kings with kingdoms.

Again, look at the reply: *Today.....with me.....in paradise.* What had been a hope for the future is here a present possibility. And so it is for us, not primarily a possibility for the future, but a possibility for the present. Paradise for us? Here? Today? **Yes!** It is possible even in the contradictions and confusions of this life to keep the center of our being calm and undisturbed. It is possible even in this life to go through one hellish situation after another with strength and confidence of spirit, with peace and with joy, even when we’re still part of this earthly scene of chance and change.

Therein lies the tragedy and the glory of the penitent thief. His tragedy is that his introduction to Paradise came so late, but not

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too late. His glory is that he found Jesus in time, gaining a strength of spirit and faith even in the agony of his own Cross.

It is our tragedy to fail to grasp what Christ can do for our lives here and now. It is our glory to discover with Him how to live the heavenly life even while we still walk the earth.

AMEN.