

Christ, My King

I find the story in today's Gospel the most moving of all, well worthy of its place in Luke's account. Think of its status: it stands at the very heart of the salvation of the human race. It is the last conversation Jesus has on earth with any of us. Most movingly, it is the one place in the Gospel where another human being turns to him and calls him by his own name, "Jesus".

The Highest Privilege

And to whom is it granted, to share this final moment with the redeemer of the human race? Well: to a man of very considerable quality. He is *a criminal*; and how do we know that? We know it because a court has convicted him. By the same rule, we know that Jesus Christ is also a criminal; they are both convicts. It is worth saying again, in case we miss the point of it: *Jesus Christ is a convict*. Luke's programme over the whole of this year has been to disturb us all with statements like that. He wants to disturb the Pharisees who go up to the Temple and say prayers to themselves, thanking God for making them so virtuous and superior. He wants to unsettle the elder sons who do their duty with such bitterness, while their juniors are out wasting money on whores and parties. He wants to upset priests who pass by on the other side whilst Jesus lies in the ditch unaided, our neighbour in distress. He wants to shock rich people who admire their gardens whilst beggars die on the other side of the wall. But above all he wants to stop in our tracks those of us who disqualify ourselves from being loved and saved, because we know our unworthiness. The highest privilege granted to anyone is given to a fellow-convict: the only one of us all to be told, *Today you will be with me in Paradise*.

This Surreal Conversation

How does it come about, on the horrific stage of legalised carnage, with that presiding engine of destruction, the Roman Army doing its worst to three trashed human beings, that such amazing graciousness should prevail? Why would a crook whose deeds have found him out, whose defences are shot to pieces, and who, in the onlookers eyes is bound for hell, manage to say words of such justice and decency to Jesus, when his brother in crime can only find abuse to offer him, and bitter mockery? He speaks of the crime that has

brought him to this pass, and acknowledges the innocence of Jesus; and he rebukes his brother for not noticing what others have also acknowledged, even Herod, even Pontius Pilate: *this man has done nothing wrong*. So in the last suffering lap of his race, Jesus finds sympathy and honour flowing in the heart of a man who is the dregs of humanity, and has, like Jesus, been thrown away and condemned.

This Is Royalty

Despite all expectation to the contrary, this man speaks the language of the Kingdom of God. In John's very different account of the Passion, the kingship of Jesus is probed by the totally foxed Roman Prefect: and Jesus says to him: *I came into the world to bear witness to the truth; and everyone who is on the side of truth listens to my voice*. Here is a man who has seen the truth in Jesus, and who is on his side, even at such a terrible pass. And Jesus senses that in his utter poverty, this brother who has perhaps a few minutes left to live somehow knows him for what he is: *Remember me, Jesus, when you come into your kingdom*. He knows that Jesus is a king. He knows he can ask nothing of Jesus, because he says: *we deserve our sentence: we are paying for what we did*. So his humble prayer, simply to be *remembered* in whatever state Jesus is going to inherit, has about it an ultimate beauty, a perfect justice. Jesus responds like a king, and promises the dying man light, rest, and happiness with him in the life to come.

How Luke Loves The Poor!

Let us love this man. We should follow an ancient tradition of the Catholic Church, and remember that he who shares Jesus' death so closely is given a name and a niche: he is called *saint Dismas*; and there is nothing in the least dismal about him. He is a glorious figure, because the man he called *Jesus* (saviour) was royally generous to him in the moment of his death, and of our salvation. How did he qualify for such a gift, except by humility and truthfulness, and a readiness to trust in a man who had done no wrong? These are qualities which tear open the veil, and allow the light of the Kingdom of Christ to dawn. The ones best equipped to display the reign of God are like him: the least of humanity and the lowest. *Fr Philip*