

Throughout this year we have been accompanied each Sunday by that most gracious Gospel writer, Luke. His account of the Lord's Passion, which we read this year on Palm Sunday, is quite different from the other three accounts. Mark points our attention to the complete isolation of Jesus at his crucifixion, how his friends all deserted him and ran into the darkness from Gethsemane. He describes the mocking remarks of the bystanders, all asking him what had become of his miraculous powers now. Mark also tells us of the abuse of the two criminals crucified near him. It seems to Mark that even those who share his fate are miles away from him in sympathy.

Luke modifies the story in his gospel, and we don't know where this different account comes from. Instead of pointing up the loneliness of Jesus, the Lukan Gospel shows us that in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus is visited by an angel from God to comfort or strengthen him. His prayer to be released is not granted; but he is given special strength to accept the Passion which lay ahead. For Jesus, it is enough. Instead of praying into silence three times, and coming in great distress to find his disciples at the end of each period of prayer, Luke describes only one prayer, and the coming of the angel is the end of the matter.

From that moment the whole picture changes. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, and as a result of this Herod finds no fault in Jesus, and returns him to Pilate with a declaration of his innocence. Pilate himself then tells the priests he can find no fault in Jesus; thus there are two declarations of his innocence from the political leaders. As he is taken out to be crucified, the women of Jerusalem begin to weep over him. When the soldiers nail him to his cross he prays for their forgiveness. Finally there comes this immensely moving last conversation between Jesus and a fellow human being. The first criminal taunts him bitterly: *if you are the Christ, save yourself, and us as well!* But his brother in crime finds words of pity and goodness to say in this awful plight. He calls his brother to fear God, and then admits that their crimes have deserved them this sentence of death. Then he adds his voice to that of Herod and Pilate, for the third time bearing witness that Jesus has done nothing wrong. Then he says, astonishingly: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* The man clearly recognises something amazingly royal and sovereign about Jesus. Even nailed up, with his death waiting to annihilate him, Jesus inspires a dying convict with the thought of a Kingdom to come. He knows he can hope for no part in it; but he asks to be remembered when Jesus enters into this realm.

It must seem incredible when Jesus turns his head towards the man, and welcomes his request and the unspoken act of faith that makes it possible. *I promise you: today you will be with me in Paradise.* What would any onlooker make of it? The ravings of two cynics? Madness? That is not what Luke thinks of it. He knows that, with all earthly hopes removed from them, Jesus and the criminal are walking side by side in the valley of the shadow of death. There it is possible to face tremendous truths; there is no longer any reason for lies.

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus stands before Pilate, whose Roman authority has power of life and death over him. Here too there is talk about a kingdom; Pilate seems to have sensed some strange power in Jesus, and he wants to know what it is. Jesus puts it into words for him. *I came into the world to bear witness to the truth. All who are on the side of truth will obey my voice.* Pilate only knows one important truth: the truth of Roman military power. But he knows his military might is not threatened by this gentle king. The quiet power sensed by the criminal is stronger than Roman power, which has long since passed away. We too can hear the voice of Jesus, when we have lain aside the oppressive forcing of others which so easily comes to our hand. *Blessed are the gentle, they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the poor, the Kingdom of heaven is theirs.* These are the teachings he gave us, and in the moment of his own laying down of life, he is able to offer us their fruits. We mark this ending of the Church's year by surrendering our earthly oppressions, and coming to know the joy of his promises. May our usurped power ebb from us. May his kingdom come.