

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." —
Luke 23:34
Vinod

"Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." — Luke 23:43
Iris

Until recently, there was only one aspect of this phrase that was important to me - and it was deeply connected to the sentence before it, which is set to music in one of my absolute favourite Taizé songs: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

Ever since I knew that song, I have wanted it to be sung at my funeral. I have never felt overly guilty about anything evil I have done. I have no conversion experience to show either, in my own way I have always been a believer. Nor have I ever really had this overwhelming feeling that I am forgiven. But what I have is a feeling that is at least as overwhelming when I think about what I will have to show when I stand before the throne of Jesus someday. We Christians have such a responsibility, the highest demands are placed on us. And how often do I fail to live up to it? How often do I become guilty by not doing the right thing? There are many people in the Bible whom I greatly admire and see as my role models. Often, however, he is the only one with whom I can really identify - that other man on the cross who knows that he deserves to be right there. And then I wish to have the same confidence to ask my thorn-crowned King to remember me:

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

The second aspect only became clear to me (as it so often happens when I really understand theological questions and not just learn them by heart) when I read a fantasy book. In "The Wheel of Time" there is a powerful order of female mages. They have protected the world through the last millennia. Their leader, the Amyrlin, is a figure very much like the Pope. Due to the greed for power of another mage, she is deposed and the powerful group breaks into two factions. All this is highly dangerous because, of course, it is precisely at this time that the forces of darkness are gathering to attack. Egwene, the real Amyrlin, is captured by the power-hungry faction. And what does she do? She does not insist on privileges or on being better off. She bears the humiliations with dignity, helps everyone - even those who are actually on the wrong side - where she can, reminds her sisters again and

again that they belong together and are needed as a unity. From the position of the prisoner she does the work of the amyrlin and serves her sisters. She leads from below in a most impressive way.

Of course, in our scene here it is on a different level, but I don't know if I would have even recognised it if I hadn't had the example of "leading from below" from my fantasy book. Jesus is in one of the worst positions imaginable. Yet, if you follow the events, he impressively shows - starting with the washing of the feet - that he is the King. He has no intrigues going on, does not rail back, does not humiliate himself by his behaviour, does not fight desperate battles and dubious counter-attacks. He is calm, prudent, superior, considerate, fulfils his duties as far as he is still able to for example by responsibly looking after his mother, shows readiness to forgive, greatness and love.

In full sovereignty he grants the wish and needs of the man next to him and paves his way into his kingdom of redemption and bliss.

"Woman, behold thy Son." — John 19:26
Ralph

"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" — Mark 15:34
Lauren

I think we can better understand these words by looking at the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. The separation from the Father as He hung on the cross was foreseen and to some extent even pre-experienced by Jesus the night before. The terrible agony there was a glimpse of what was to come upon Him on the cross, when the Father would turn His face away and Jesus would be confronted by and look into, an abyss of sin and darkness. The garden scene is so important because it was there that Jesus decided to go through with laying down His life. From here on we can trust in His love for us; it was His love that gave Him the strength to endure the torture, the mockery, the brutal crucifixion, but especially the abandonment by His father.

It is also important to understand that everything in history pointed to this moment when Jesus would bear our

sins and redeem what had been lost in the first garden. Jesus' entire life culminated in these hours on the cross; He knew that His purpose in coming was to die and He had been trying to tell the disciples this in the weeks preceding His death. Here as Jesus cries out in Aramaic "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani", this is the moment where justice and love intersect. He was separated from the Father so that we can have access. His death is the answer to all the prayers for mercy, for forgiveness and redemption over many centuries - God had a plan and wasn't going to abandon us to the grave. Indeed, as Tim Keller often says, "He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died."

So what does this mean for us today?

For me the horrifying awareness in the Garden and His loud cry on the cross reveal who He is - He is the son of God - as the centurion boldly proclaimed as he witnessed the way in which Jesus died. This should lead to a reflection of who we are and who He is.

And it means we can trust Him....because of what He went through for us, we can trust Him. If Jesus trusted the Father through the worst of deaths, then we can trust Him with our lives and our hearts can be at peace.

In the words of the song Prince of Peace (Hillsong United):

Tearing through the night, riding on the storm
Staring down the fight, my eyes found Yours
Shining like the sun, striding through my fear
The Prince of peace met me there
Hope like the sunlight piercing through the dark
The Prince of peace came and broke into my heart
The violent cross, the empty grave
And in Your light I found grace.
Your love surrounds me, when my thoughts wage war
When night screams terror, there Your voice will roar
Come death or shadow, God, I know
Your light will meet me there.
When fear comes knocking, there You'll be my guard
When day breeds trouble, there You'll hold my heart
Come storm or battle, God, I know
Your peace will meet me there
Oh, be still my heart
And know that You are God. And You heard my prayer.
Amen.

"I thirst." — John 19:28

Klaus

"It is finished." — John 19:30

Daphne

"Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit." — Luke 23:46

Katie

"Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last."

I choose to reflect on this passage, on the moment of Jesus' death, because over the last several years, I have encountered many of death's faces, and Jesus has given me company, direction, and eventually hope in that process.

In Christian spaces, we frequently talk about how Jesus' death on Good Friday was a sacrifice that paid for our sins, an atonement that restored us to God despite our tendency to aim our lives in directions that don't bring us closest to God's loving presence.

This action of God's grace and the gift of restored relationship with God through the cross holds a prominent space within my faith and hope.

But, My hope in Christ and my love for our God has grown deeper, because of another reality tucked into the death of Jesus on the cross.

It is a reality, a promise for everyone who faces the door to death - and the unknown beyond it - be it the death of our bodies, our loved ones, our dreams or our plans.

The promise is that Jesus has gone first for us into death, and that he shows us the way through death into new life. We do not enter the mysterious darkness of death or the wake of grief it leaves behind on our own. Christ walks with us. Christ went before us. And, Christ shows us how to hand over our broken, grieving, worn down spirits to a loving God when death steals away life.

I do not know much about death besides the ways it has found its way into my life, but as I look at the lives of

those close to me, as well as life around the world, no matter who we are, death comes to us in many ways - small and big. Many deaths aren't fair. They come at the hands of injustice and evil, war, carelessness, random tragedy, and the failings of our human selves.

Sometimes, of course, death is natural, ending seasons that have been long and full. It can also be important - helping us to leave behind parts of ourselves that no longer serve us: like our pride or ways of relationship that hurt other people.

I think Jesus' death speaks to all these, but perhaps especially his death on the cross speaks to all death that comes too soon or in unjust ways.

3 years ago, my sisters and I walked with my dad as he was taken away from us too soon. He was diagnosed with brain cancer that does not yet have any cure. And, after many months, My dad died surrounded by those who loved him, wondering what to do with the pain of losing him.

Most recently, I found out that a dream of mine would come to an end sooner than I thought. I thought I would be working here for many years, but now I'm grieving the fact that I won't be living in Freiburg like I thought I would. That has felt so sad and so surprising - a loss I didn't see coming.

We lose relationships and jobs, potential futures and long hoped for dreams again and again in this life.

And I am thankful that as we experience death and grief, God doesn't dishonor our loss by pretending that anything could make it better immediately. Instead, Christ waits with us in the darkness. Just like the span of days between Good Friday and Easter, new life does not spring up right away.

Soon, we will celebrate in hope. But today, we are invited into the dark in between, to join with those hurting, lost, and waiting for new life. We are invited to lean on God and commend to God our spirits at their most broken. Because Jesus went first for us into the darkness, we can trust God has not forsaken us, and that In fact, God is here with us.

Soon, we can celebrate death overcome. But for the next three days, we are reminded that we are accompanied. Jesus has gone before us. We are shown a way.

I don't know where in each of your lives you are facing a sense of loss or death. But, I do know you are not alone. God does not run from our deepest sadness and darkness. God is in it. Waiting to guide us through. Hoping to hold and heal our broken spirits.

God, we bring to you our lost and dark spaces, and the heartbreak of your people in the world around us. And, in the same way your son has shown us: it is into your capable and loving hands that we commit our spirits.