

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
Last Sunday of the Church Year
24 November 2013
Grace and Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Lk 23.27-43

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

The last day, the end times, eschatology—it all comes to a head on the cross.

At the end of the Church year,

or at the end of our lives,

or, if we're lucky to see it, the end of the world, we find ourselves at the cross.

Nails piercing our hands and feet,

blood pouring down our backs where the Romans have beaten us with rods and whips—

our bodies broken, our spirits crushed,

we're done for; it's over.

It's the Last Day of the Church year, the end times, judgment day—

the Day when “*you see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked*” (Mal 3:18)

and we're on the cross.

But we're not alone!

No, we're simply thieves hanging justly for what we've done—

but there's a third, an innocent man who hasn't committed any crime.

His beating was just as bad as ours, but they went over the top with their mocking.

While they beat Him they added insult to injury:

“*He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!*” (Lk 23:35)

“*If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!*” (23:37);

and again, “*Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!*” (23:39)

They cast lots for His clothing, gave Him sour wine, and hung a mocking plaque over His head.

But why? *What evil has He done?* (23:41)

“*For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it's dry?*” (23:31)

That is, if God does this to one who is innocent, what will He do to the one truly guilty?

So with the thief we pray,

“*Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom*” (23:42).

These are the only words we can say.

They're words of fear and awe.

They don't defend us or pretend to justify what we've done;

they simply beg Jesus for mercy.

We don't have a shot in this life.

You will die. And you deserve it.

Sin will finally run its course—
 maybe it'll be pneumonia that gets you, or a heart attack;
 it could be a car wreck, a slip on the ice, or even just falling asleep.
 However it comes, you've got a Last Day.

And when you're on your Last Day, these are your words:
 "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom" (23:42).

His Kingdom, what we call Heaven, isn't yours by right or achievement.
 In fact, your works keep you out.
 Your sin disqualifies you.
 And there's nothing *you* can do about it!

All that anger will catch up to you.
 Your lust isn't as secret as you think.
 Pride will be your downfall—
 or maybe the way you despise the marriage bed.
 And these are just the symptoms of a much greater and deeper guilt.
 The verdict spoken in Eden that cast your first parents from the garden separates you still today.
 And ever since that curse, you've tried to find another way in—
 another door, another way, another word.

Our problem is that we've always looked for that other word within us.
 We've hoped that we could change His mind, or at least try to make up for it.

But what we really need is another word from heaven.
 We need a different verdict—
 one that comes apart from us, but is entirely *for us*.

That's why we thank God for the cross.
 That on the Last Day—
 of the Church year, of our lives, of the world,
 the Day of Judgment and vengeance and retribution—
 Christ gets the last word:
 "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (23:43).

That's the new verdict.
 And you can't get more sure and certain than the Lord's word of promise.

Now, this promise has nothing to do with you first turning things around or on the right track.
 It doesn't come from something done by you or found inside of you—
 it's simply because He loves you!

He loves the criminals on the cross—both of them—
 and the people standing by and watching,
 the scoffing rulers, mocking soldiers—even *you*.

Jesus loves *you*.

Ever since you were ever born—and before!

He's loved you every day of your life—even when you thought no one could.

And when it comes to your Last Day, when everything and everyone seems to drift away,
you can know for certain that He loves you then too.

How can you know this?

Because He said so.

That's the verdict.

And the promise He made has opened up Eden for you.

"*Today*," He says, you will be with Him in paradise; and He with you.

And so it is.

In the midst of suffering, mocking, and unbelief—

on His *Last Day*, on the cross—

Jesus forgives: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (23:34).

Promise and forgiveness go hand in hand.

That's the verdict; and that's why you're here.

You're here because this is the place where that verdict is truly spoken again.

Here is the Perfect Sacrifice, the lamb without blemish,

the Christ, the Son of God, His chosen One—

and He's here *for you*.

Here He promises a new day—a day that's no longer marked by suffering, mocking, or death—

no more loneliness, barrenness, or anger; no more death!

Today, He promises life and Paradise.

And it's all through His word—His verdict of sins forgiven and life eternal.

And just in case you doubt that word, or the man who speaks it,

He delivers it Himself with His own Body and Blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

All that mocking, "*He saved others; let Him save Himself*," was right!

He saved others—that's as clear as it gets.

And today He saves you.

He promises you a new day, marked by life and joy and Paradise.

"*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*" (23:43).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit