

November 24, 2013 – Feast of Christ the King
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Second Samuel 5:1-3; Psalms 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5; Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” Luke 23: 42

In the Gospel we hear the story of the execution of Jesus. On his right and left were two criminals, or revolutionaries, depending on one’s interpretation. Either way, Jesus’ mockery and death in the company of these men translates into profound comfort and solidarity with the “crucified people” of the world.

The “repentant criminal” has through the ages has been known as Dismas. I’ve known Dismas quite literally. Dismas Omondi was on death row in Kenya when I first met him on his prison block in 2005. In that time I came to know him as a “jail house lawyer” and Catholic leader among the more than 100 men on his block who were assigned a similar fate. In a spirit of service Dismas prepared many legal documents for his fellow prisoners, preparing them for their day in court. Dismas was also the Catholic leader on his death row block helping to guide prayer with his colleagues. Thirteen years after his initial incarceration, Dismas, who had always asserted his innocence, was released.

So many prisoners the world over, especially those facing death, identify with the real life circumstances of Jesus and especially with the profound forgiveness he represents. On the heels of being mocked and belittled, tortured and left for dead, Jesus has no judgment to pass on the “guilty” man next to him; rather, he is filled with divine love and forgiveness without discussion of what the man might have done.

Indeed, we know from early in Luke that Jesus rejoices in the one repentant sinner more than in the righteous 99. As he approached his execution, another death row friend of mine in Texas found such tremendous comfort in that story -- and so should we, as we are all guilty of sin.

Time and time again Jesus holds two qualities in beautiful tension. On the one hand Jesus holds us all to very high standards, insisting that we sell what we have and give to the poor, that the rich man will find it near impossible to get into heaven and that we are to be judged by how we live out the works of mercy; indeed, the bar is set very high for us all. At the same time the very last task of Jesus in our world is profound forgiveness without concern for any possible transgressions. Yet, by the Grace of God alone, the impossible is possible.

My friend Dismas had to surrender his life to God and in the emptying, he developed a love and peace that is amazing. Now free, he lives each day with joy. His day to day work is the menial task of cleaning toilets at the court house that once seemingly sealed his fate. He does his work with joy and dignity. One would understand if he wanted to get as far away from prison as humanly possible, but Dismas, Christ in disguise, returns to pray with prisoners and continue to offer assistance in any way he can. Approaching God with great commitment and great humility perhaps we can all experience the same grace and peace.

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