

April 13, 2003
Saint Mary of Egypt

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Referring to the two thieves who died on either side of Jesus, St. Mark records that "those who were crucified with Him reviled Him" (15:32). At least they did so for some time. During the course of the afternoon, however, one of them came to think better of the matter, as he watched our Lord hang there in patience, praying for His enemies. St. Luke describes the scene: "Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'" (23:39-43).

This profoundly moving scene is best considered, I believe, within both its immediate and its wider context in the Gospel of Luke.

Three considerations suggest themselves with respect to Luke's immediate context.

First, this scene with the thieves is the second of three times that Jesus is pronounced innocent. The first pronouncement was made by Pilate and Herod (23:14-15), and the third will issue from the lips of the centurion under the Cross (23:47). This verdict of the second thief, then, is added to the chorus of those who profess Jesus to be executed unjustly (23:41).

Second, the blasphemy by the unrepentant thief is the third and culminating instance in which the crucified Jesus is reviled in identical terms. First, there were the Jewish rulers who challenged Jesus to *save* Himself if He was the Messiah (23:35). Then the Gentile soldiers defied Him to *save* Himself, if He was a king" (23:37). Finally, the unrepentant thief challenges Jesus to *save* Himself, adding "and us" (23:39). We observe that the same verb, "save" or *sozein*, is used in all three instances. The thief's reviling of the Lord thus forms a climax to the theme.

This sequence prepares for its foil, the scene's culminating irony, in which only one man, the "good thief," perceives the true path to salvation. He boldly grasps the salvific meaning of Jesus' death. He is the "good thief," indeed. In his final and defining act of theft, as it were, he extends his soul and clutches hold of eternal life.

Third, the encounter with the two thieves immediately precedes the death of Jesus, so that Jesus' words to the second thief, promising to meet him that day in Paradise, are His last recorded words to another human being during His earthly life. It has been justly remarked that the "good thief" was canonized even before his death. The good thief represents the repentant Church gathered at the Cross, and the words that he hears are the last thing that Jesus has to say to His people on earth.

With regard to the wider context of Luke's gospel, there are two points particularly worthy of note in this story of the thieves.

First, in drawing a contrast between the two men, Luke follows a pattern of antithesis that he has employed throughout his entire narrative. For instance, it is Luke who immediately opposes the Beatitudes with the Woes (6:20-26). It is Luke who elaborates in detail the differences between the Pharisee and the woman who came into his house (7:44-47). It is Luke, likewise, who contrasts two men who went up to the temple to pray (18:9-14), the two sons of the same father (15:27-32), the rich man and the pauper (16:19-22), the faithful and unfaithful servants (12:35-39), the leper and his nine companions (17:17), the rich donors and the poor widow (21:1-2). Luke's opposition between the two thieves, then, is the climax in a lengthy series of contrasts.

Second, Luke's good thief is the final example of individuals who confess their guilt in the hope of obtaining divine mercy. Earlier instances include the publican in the temple (18:13), the prodigal son (15:21), and the repentant woman (7:36-50). In all of these examples Luke's narrative resonates with the Pauline emphasis on justification by faith. While in each of these examples the characters come to God with no justifying works of their own, this note is especially obvious in the thief on the cross, who turns to Jesus for mercy in the very end of his life.

Finally, this thief seems to ask for so very little. Sensing that our Lord is about to go to some destiny different from

his own, he modestly pleads only to be remembered. Ah, but "the grace shown to him is more abundant than the request he made," commented St. Ambrose. That very day the dying thief will be with Jesus. Here the Sacred Text employs the very expression, *with*, habitually used by St. Paul to describe eternal life. Everlasting glory consists in being *with the Lord* (Romans 6:8; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:22-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; 5:10). It is hardly a wonder, therefore, that Holy Church, when chanting the evangelical Beatitudes during the Divine Liturgy, habitually uses as an antiphon the prayer of the dying thief, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

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