

## Historical Commentary

Christ the King - Year C



The Liturgy Letter

---

### Commentary on Luke 23:33-43: Selections from Church Fathers & John Calvin

**Cyril of Alexandria:** When he hung on the precious cross, two thieves were hung with him. What comes from this? It was truly a mockery as far as the plan of the Jews, but it was also the commemoration of prophecy. It is written, "He was also numbered with the transgressors." For our sakes, he became a curse. That is, he became accursed. It is written again, "Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree." His act did away with the curse that was on us. We are blessed with him and because of him. Knowing this, blessed David says, "Blessed are we of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Blessings descend to us by his sufferings. He paid our debts in our place. He bore our sins. He was stricken in our place,<sup>4</sup> as it is written. He took our sins in his own body on the tree, because it is true that his bruises heal us. He also was sick because of our sins, and we are delivered from the sicknesses of the soul.

**Ambrose:** The very place of the cross is in the middle, as conspicuous to all. It is above the grave of Adam, as the Hebrews truly argue. It was fitting that the beginning of death occurred where the first fruits of our life were placed.

**Cyril of Alexandria:** By becoming like us and bearing our sufferings for our sakes, Christ restores human nature to how it was in the beginning. The first man was certainly in the Paradise of delight in the beginning. The absence of suffering and of corruption exalted him. He despised the commandment given to him and fell under a curse, condemnation and the snare of death by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. By the very same thing, Christ restores him to his original condition. He became the fruit of the tree by enduring the precious cross for our sakes, that he might destroy death, which by means of the tree [of Adam] had invaded the bodies of humankind.

**Augustine:** Look at the Lord who did precisely what he commanded. After so many things the godless Jews committed against him, repaying him evil for good, did he not say as he hung on the cross, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing"? He prayed as man, and as God with the Father, he heard the prayer. Even now he prays in us, for us and is prayed to by us. He prays in us as our high priest. He prays for us as our head. He is prayed to by us as our God. When he was praying as he hung on the cross, he could see and foresee. He could see all his enemies. He could foresee that many of them would become his friends. That is why he was interceding for them all. They were raging, but he was praying. They were saying to Pilate "Crucify," but he was crying out, "Father, forgive." He was hanging from the cruel nails, but he did not lose his gentleness. He was asking for pardon for those from whom he was receiving such hideous treatment.

So when they hear this place in the Gospel, where the Lord says on the cross, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing," they say to themselves, He could do that as the Son of God, as the only Son of the Father. Yes, it was flesh hanging there, but God was hidden within. As for us, though, what are we to do that sort of thing? So didn't he really mean it when he gave this order? Perish the thought; he certainly meant it. If you think it is asking too much of you to imitate your Lord, look at Stephen your fellow servant....

**Augustine:** You are a Christian. You carry the cross of Christ on your forehead. The mark stamped on you teaches you what you should profess. He was hanging on the cross, which you carry on your forehead. Do not delight in the sign of the wood but in the sign of the one hanging on it. When he was hanging on the cross, he was looking around at the people raving against him, putting up with their insults and praying for his enemies. While they were killing him, the doctor was curing the sick with his blood. He said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." These words were not futile or without effect. Later, thousands of those people believed in the one they murdered, so that they learned how to suffer for him who had suffered for them and at their hands. Brothers and sisters, we should understand this from this sign, from this stamp that Christians receive even when they become catechumens. From this, we should understand why we are Christians.

**Leo the Great:** The very appearance of the gallows showed the criterion that he would apply when he comes to judge everyone. The believing thief's faith prefigured those who would be saved, while the blasphemer's wickedness foreshadowed those who would be condemned. Christ's passion, therefore, contains the mystery of our salvation.

**Ambrose:** It is important to consider what type of man ascends. I see him naked. Let him who prepares to conquer this age ascend in this way so that he does not seek the help of the age. Adam, who desired clothing, was conquered. He who laid down his clothes conquered. He ascended in the same way that nature formed us with God as Creator. In the same way as the first Adam lived in Paradise, the second Adam entered paradise. In order not to conquer for only himself but for all, he held out his hands to draw all things to himself. Having wrenched them from the bonds of death and hung them on the yoke of faith, he joined those of heaven to those who before were of earth.

**Justin Martyr:** When the Word said, "I am a worm, and no man; the reproach of men, and the outcast of the people," he foretold what would clearly happen to him. He is everywhere a reproach to us who believe in him, and he is the outcast of the people, for he was thrown out in disgrace by your people, and he endured all the indignities which you directed toward him.... Those who saw him on the cross wagged their heads, curled their lips in scorn, turned up their noses, and sarcastically uttered the words which are recorded in the memoirs of the apostles. "He called himself the Son of God; let him come down from the cross and walk! Let God save him!"

**Ambrose:** The superscription is written and placed above, not below the cross, because the government is upon his shoulders. What is this government if not his eternal power and Godhead? When asked, "Who are you?" he replied, "The beginning, who also speaks to you." Let us read this superscription. "Jesus of Nazareth," it says, "The King of the Jews." The superscription is fittingly above the cross because Christ's kingdom does not belong to his human body but to his divine authority. The superscription is fittingly above the cross,

because although the Lord Jesus was on the cross, he shines above the cross with the majesty of a king.

Cyril of Alexandria: “This man,” he says, “has done nothing that is hateful.” O how beautiful is this confession! How wise the reasoning and how excellent the thoughts! He became the confessor of the Savior’s glory and the accuser of the pride of those who crucified him....Let us look at his most beautiful confession of faith. He says, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” You see him crucified and call him a king. You expect the One who bears scorn and suffering to come in godlike glory. You see him surrounded by a Jewish crowd, the wicked gang of the Pharisees, and Pilate’s band of soldiers. All of these were mocking him, and no one confessed him. Commentary

Leo the Great: Until now, one [thief] was the equal in all things of his companion. He was a robber on the roads and always a danger to the safety of people. Deserving the cross, he suddenly becomes a confessor of Christ.... “Remember me, Lord, when you enter into your kingdom.” Then came the gift in which faith itself received a response. Jesus said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” This promise surpasses the human condition, because it did not come so much from the wood of a cross as from a throne of power. From that height, he gives a reward to faith. There he abolishes the debt of human transgression, because the “form of God” did not separate itself from the “form of a servant.” Even in the middle of this punishment, both the inviolable divinity and the suffering human nature preserved its own character and its own oneness.

Chrysostom: In the beginning, God shaped man, and man was an image of the Father and the Son. God said, “Let us make man to our image and likeness.” Again, when he wished to bring the thief into paradise, he immediately spoke the word and brought him in. Christ did not need to pray to do this, although he had kept all people after Adam from entering there. God put there the flaming sword to guard Paradise. By his authority, Christ opened paradise and brought in the thief.

Cyril of Jerusalem: The tree brought ruin to Adam. It will bring you into paradise. Do not fear the Serpent. He will not throw you out, for he has fallen from heaven. I do not say to you, ‘This day you will depart,’ but ‘This day you will be with me.’ ” Take heart; you will not be thrown out. Do not fear the flaming sword, because it stands in awe of its Lord.

Ambrose: He asked the Lord to remember him when he came into his kingdom, but the Lord said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, this day you shall be with me in paradise.” For life is to be with Christ, because where Christ is, there is the kingdom.

Augustine: “Recognize to whom you are commending yourself. You believe I am going to come, but even before I come, I am everywhere. That is why, although I am about to descend into hell, I have you with me in paradise today. You are with me and not entrusted to someone else. You see, my humility has come down to mortal human beings and to the dead, but my divinity has never departed from paradise.”

John Calvin: Jesus was brought to the place where it was customary to execute criminals, that his death might be more ignominious. Now though this was done according to custom, still we ought to consider the loftier purpose of God; for he determined that his Son should be cast out of the city as unworthy of human intercourse, that he might admit us into his heavenly kingdom with the angels.

...Now the greater the ignominy and disgrace which he endured before the world, so much the more acceptable and noble a spectacle did he exhibit in his death to God and to the angels. For the infamy of the place did not hinder him from erecting there a splendid trophy of his victory; nor did the offensive smell of the carcasses which lay there hinder the sweet savor of his sacrifice from diffusing itself throughout the whole world, and penetrating even to heaven.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them. By this expression Christ gave evidence that he was that mild and gentle lamb, which was to be led out to be sacrificed, as Isaiah the prophet had foretold, (53:7.) For not only does he abstain from revenge, but pleads with God the Father for the salvation of those by whom he is most cruelly tormented. It would have been a great matter not to think of rendering evil for evil, (1 Peter 3:9;) as Peter, when he exhorts us to patience by the example of Christ, says that he did not render curses for curses, and did not revenge the injuries done to him, but was fully satisfied with having God for his avenger (1 Peter 2:23.) But this is a far higher and more excellent virtue, to pray that God would forgive his enemies.

And they that passed by. These circumstances carry great weight; for they place before us the extreme abasement of the Son of God, that we may see more clearly how much our salvation cost him, and that, reflecting that we justly deserved all the punishments which he endured, we may be more and more excited to repentance. For in this exhibition God hath plainly showed to us how wretched our condition would have been, if we had not a Redeemer. But all that Christ endured in himself ought to be applied for our consolation. This certainly was more cruel than all the other tortures, that they upbraided, and reviled, and tormented him as one that had been cast off and forsaken by God, (Isaiah 53:4.) And, therefore, David, as the representative of Christ, complains chiefly of this among the distresses which he suffered; (Psalm 22:7.) And, indeed, there is nothing that inflicts a more painful wound on pious minds than when ungodly men, in order to shake their faith, upbraid them with being deprived of the assistance and favor of God. This is the harsh persecution with which, Paul tells us, Isaac was tormented by Ishmael, (Galatians 4:29;) not that he attacked him with the sword, and with outward violence, but that, by turning the grace of God into ridicule, he endeavored to overthrow his faith. These temptations were endured, first by David, and afterwards by Christ him-self, that they might not at the present day strike us with excessive alarm, as if they had been unusual; for there never will be wanting wicked men who are disposed to insult our distresses. And whenever God does not assist us according to our wish, but conceals his aid for a little time, it is a frequent stratagem of Satan, to allege that our hope was to no purpose, as if his promise had failed.

...But let us, on the contrary, that our faith may firmly rely on Christ, seek a foundation in his cross; for in no other way could he be acknowledged to be the lawful King of Israel than by fulfilling what belonged to the Redeemer.

And the other answering. In this wicked man a striking mirror of the unexpected and incredible grace of God is held out to us, not only in his being suddenly changed into a new man, when he was near death, and drawn from hell itself to heaven, but likewise in having obtained in a moment the forgiveness of all the sins in which he had been plunged through his whole life, and in having been thus admitted to heaven before the apostles and first-fruits of the new Church. First, then, a remarkable instance of the grace of God shines in the conversion of that man. For it was not by the natural movement of the flesh that he laid aside his fierce cruelty and proud contempt of God, so as to repent

immediately, but he was subdued by the hand of God; as the whole of Scripture shows that repentance is His work. And so much the more excellent is this grace, that it came beyond the expectation of all. For who would ever have thought that a robber, in the very article of death, would become not only a devout worshiper of God, but a distinguished teacher of faith and piety to the whole world, so that we too must receive from his mouth the rule of a true and proper confession? Now the first proof which he gave of his repentance was, that he severely reproved and restrained the wicked forwardness of his companion. He then added a second, by humbling himself in open acknowledgment of his crimes, and ascribing to Christ the praise due to his righteousness. Thirdly, he displayed astonishing faith by committing himself and his salvation to the protection of Christ, while he saw him hanging on the cross and near death.

Lord, remember me. I know not that, since the creation of the world, there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith; and so much the greater admiration is due to the grace of the Holy Spirit, of which it affords so magnificent a display. A robber, who not only had not been educated in the school of Christ, but, by giving himself up to execrable murders, had endeavored to extinguish all sense of what was right, suddenly rises higher than all the apostles and the other disciples whom the Lord himself had taken so much pains to instruct; and not only so, but he adores Christ as a King while on the gallows, celebrates his kingdom in the midst of shocking and worse than revolting abasement, and declares him, when dying, to be the Author of life. Even though he had formerly possessed right faith, and heard many things about the office of Christ, and had even been confirmed in it by his miracles, still that knowledge might have been overpowered by the thick darkness of so disgraceful a death. But that a person, ignorant and uneducated, and whose mind was altogether corrupted, should all at once, on receiving his earliest instructions, perceive salvation and heavenly glory in the accursed cross, was truly astonishing. For what marks or ornaments of royalty did he see in Christ, so as to raise his mind to his kingdom? And, certainly, this was, as it were, from the depth of hell to rise above the heavens. To the flesh it must have appeared to be fabulous and absurd, to ascribe to one who was rejected and despised, (Isaiah 53:3) whom the world could not endure, an earthly kingdom more exalted than all the empires of the world. Hence we infer how acute must have been the eyes of his mind, by which he beheld life in death, exaltation in ruin, glory in shame, victory in destruction, a kingdom in bondage.

Now if a robber, by his faith, elevated Christ—while hanging on the cross, and, as it were, overwhelmed with cursing—to a heavenly throne, woe to our sloth, if we do not behold him with reverence while sitting at the right hand of God; if we do not fix our hope of life on his resurrection; if our aim is not towards heaven where he has entered. Again, if we consider, on the other hand, the condition in which he was, when he implored the compassion of Christ, our admiration of his faith will be still heightened. With a mangled body, and almost dead, he is looking for the last stroke of the executioner and yet he relies on the grace of Christ alone. First, whence came his assurance of pardon, but because in the death of Christ, which all others look upon as detestable, he beholds a sacrifice of sweet savor, efficacious for expiating the sins of the world. And when he courageously disregards his tortures, and is even so forgetful of himself, that he is carried away to the hope and desire of the hidden life, this goes far beyond the human faculties. From this teacher, therefore, whom the Lord has appointed over us to humble the pride of the flesh, let us not be ashamed to learn the mortification of the flesh, and patience, and elevation of faith, and steadiness of hope, and ardor of piety; for the more eagerly any man follows him, so much the more nearly will he approach to Christ.

Christ, although, struck by the hand of God, he appeared to be a man utterly abandoned, yet as he did not cease to be the Savior of the world, he was always endued with heavenly power for fulfilling his office. And, first, we ought to observe his inconceivable readiness in so kindly receiving the robber without delay, and promising to make him a partaker of a happy life. There is therefore no room to doubt that he is prepared to admit into his kingdom all, without exception, who shall apply to him. Hence we may conclude with certainty that we shall be saved, provided that he remember us; and it is impossible that he shall forget those who commit to him their salvation.

But if a robber found the entrance into heaven so easy, because, while he beheld on all sides ground for total despair, he relied on the grace of Christ; much more will Christ, who has now vanquished death, stretch out his hand to us from his throne, to admit us to be partakers of life. For since Christ has nailed to his cross the handwriting which was opposed to us, (Colossians 2:14,) and has destroyed death and Satan, and in his resurrection has triumphed over the prince of the world, (John 12:31,) it would be unreasonable to suppose that the passage from death to life will be more laborious and difficult to us than to the robber. Whoever then in dying shall commit to Christ, in true faith, the keeping of his soul, will not be long detained or allowed to languish in suspense; but Christ will meet his prayer with the same kindness which he exercised towards the robber.

...this confirms more fully what I formerly suggested, that if any man disdain to abide by the footsteps of the robber, and to follow in his path, he deserves everlasting destruction, because by wicked pride he shuts against himself the gate of heaven. And, certainly, as Christ has given to all of us, in the person of the robber, a general pledge of obtaining forgiveness, so, on the other hand, he has bestowed on this wretched man such distinguished honor, in order that, laying aside our own glory, we may glory in nothing but the mercy of God alone. If each of us shall truly and seriously examine the subject, we shall find abundant reason to be ashamed of the prodigious mass of our crimes, so that we shall not be offended at having for our guide and leader a poor wretch, who obtained salvation by free grace. Again, as the death of Christ at that time yielded its fruit, so we infer from it that souls, when they have departed from their bodies, continue to live; otherwise the promise of Christ, which he confirms even by an oath, would be a mockery.

Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. We ought not to enter into curious and subtle arguments about the place of paradise. Let us rest satisfied with knowing that those who are engrafted by faith into the body of Christ are partakers of that life, and thus enjoy after death a blessed and joyful rest, until the perfect glory of the heavenly life is fully manifested by the coming of Christ.

One point still remains. What is promised to the robber does not alleviate his present sufferings, nor make any abatement of his bodily punishment. This reminds us that we ought not to judge of the grace of God by the perception of the flesh; for it will often happen that those to whom God is reconciled are permitted by him to be severely afflicted. So then, if we are dreadfully tormented in body, we ought to be on our guard lest the severity of pain hinder us from tasting the goodness of God; but, on the contrary, all our afflictions ought to be mitigated and soothed by this single consolation, that as soon as God has received us into his favor, all the afflictions which we endure are aids to our salvation. This will cause our faith not only to rise victorious over all our distresses, but to enjoy calm repose amidst the endurance of sufferings.