

## **Holy Wednesday: The Two Criminals**

*Luke 23.32-43*

*Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[ Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' ]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'*

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### **Extract from an interview with the second criminal in Paradise**

You'll forgive me — at least, I assume you will, based on our present location — if I don't go into the nitty gritty. Not seemly to bring it up this side o' the grave. No rule against it, o' course, but it's yesterday's news. Let's just say that what they did to me weren't hugely worse than I what I done to one or two others — God rest their souls.

That's why I lost my patience with the other bugger. Comes a time when you got to accept what you done and take the consequences. And there he is siding with the same squaddie's what's nailed him to his cross to have a go at this fella Jesus who's in the clear. Yeah, I'd got wind of him. Course. Say that, plenty hadn't. Funny, he was like the biggest geezer on the block and a complete nobody at the same time. Anyway, here was the other mug laying into the poor lamb and everything at sixes and sevens. That's why I said to him, Get real, you numbskull, you're about to cop a flower pot before the Guv'nor; give it a rest. Words to that effect, anyway.

That's what guilt does though, isn't it? Aren't man enough to face when you cocked up, and you inflict it all on someone else. Anything to save your own flesh. Except there comes a time when your flesh is headed for the dust and ain't no way out. That's what got to me as I was waiting for them legionaries to come and ship me off. No way out.

It's at times like that – if you aren't going to take it out on your neighbour – that you start to get all philosophical. This scrapyard of a world, this rotten olive in the cosmic grove – all right, back then we thought the earth was flat but from up here you can see it's blatantly spherical – that all there is? Well you can sacrifice an elephant if you think I'm going to be rubbed out without at least a fling of a hope that there might be a bit more sense to all this than some argy-bargy as we walk the plank.

It's after I've had words with the other transgressor that I turn to look at Jesus – and it hits me. Right there [twice knocks the breast]. Went through me like a ghost through a locked door, sharper than the nails they clobbered through my hands. I can't explain it. Some call it the Holy Spirit. To me it felt more like the time when I was a lad and I owned up to my Imma about stealing the figs. Silly, really. I was petrified she was going to kick me out so I couldn't even work up an apology. Just asked her to please let me stay. And she didn't say a thing, just tore a piece off the loaf she bundled out the oven ten minutes before and told me to tuck in. No word of a lie, this was the same. Some people call me the 'penitent thief' but if you read Saint Luke you'll clock that not a syllable of repentance comes past my chops. That is, if what you're on about is a proper confession – 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned' and all that (all right, bit of an anachronism, but you get the gist). To be frank, when you're being executed that kind of liturgy doesn't roll off the tongue. But if when you say 'penitence' you mean a last throw off the dice when you're sure it's all over, then call me a tea leaf. I didn't ask him to save me, even as a bit of banter. All I said was that I know you're off to where it's all fresh milk and runny honey. Will you spare a thought for me, when you get there?

And then he turns to me with that loaf of bread, still warm, and says, Here, dip in the honey, wash it down with the milk. I can hardly believe my jugs.

In actual fact, the word I used was 'remember'. A few years ago I caught a scribe going on about that word. He said that it's used in the Scriptures to ask the Lord to keep us in his favour. 'Cause it's not a given that we are: sometimes it seems we've been left high and dry. They say that's when God 'forgets' us. Now no disrespect to them scholars but that seems like a cock and bull story to me. How can Adonai Elohim be forgetful? I'd say it's you and me that's more likely to be remiss. Any case, the point I'm trying to make is that it ain't half strange that the word on my tongue at that precise moment was 'remember'. Enough to send a tingle down your spine.

Some poor bloke, squeaky clean, properly done in between us malefactors. Doesn't exactly square with the One who was so downright holy he couldn't show himself without the cosmic pyrotechnics – or when there was a bit of fog. Why on earth would he fritter away his days with us delinquents? Now I'm no scribe but I am human and I've got a whisper of a midrash about what's going on. He's between us because he has to be. What I mean is that most of us have responsibilities. Pay your way, feed your family, keep the Sabbath. But no-one's telling you to fraternise with untouchables. Only one reason why you have to go where someone else is going – that's if you're their slave. Jesus himself said as much, so I'm told: 'where I am, there shall my servant also be.' Except that when we're hanging there, it's not so evident who's who: here I am, and there's *him* next to *me*.

Who am I, anyway? Pardon the insinuation but when all's said and done, am I so different from you lot? Not one of us scrapes though without a mark against our name. But here's Jesus laying the table for all of us. Not on the cheap, either; proper silver service, like what's dished up to emperors. And if I've learned one thing from my little cameo in this drama, it's that you got just one line, if you want a place at the table: 'Remember me'. Like a key in the lock – and then you're yet to be. Yet to be. That's cockney rhyming slang for 'free'.

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Jesus, Saviour of the world,  
come to us in your mercy:  
we look to you to save and help us.  
By your cross and your life laid down,  
you set your people free:  
we look to you to save and help us.

When they were ready to perish, you saved your disciples:  
we look to you to come to our help.  
In the greatness of your mercy, loose us from our chains,  
forgive the sins of all your people.  
Make yourself known as our Saviour and mighty deliverer;  
save and help us that we may praise you.  
Come now and dwell with us, Lord Christ Jesus:  
hear our prayer and be with us always.  
And when you come in your glory:  
make us to be one with you  
and to share the life of your kingdom.