

This little snippet from the Passion Narrative of Luke is loaded with theology. And since we don't have the time on Passion Sunday to deal with it, today's feast of Christ the King gives us a good opportunity. We are told that Jesus is crucified between two criminals, meaning that He is among sinners at the end of His life – AS HE WAS THROUGHOUT HIS MINISTRY. But Jesus is not one more transgressor. Rather He is among transgressors as a sign that He bears their sins and makes intercession for them. In fact, Jesus is about to make intercession for transgressors, not only those with whom He is crucified but those who are doing the crucifying. If we read a few lines ahead of where we pick up today, we would have heard Jesus pray "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

During His life, Jesus preached and taught that people should forgive their enemies as a sign that they were sons and daughters of the merciful Father. "But I say to you Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.....Be merciful just as your Father is merciful." (Lk 6:27-28,36). However, it is one thing to preach and teach forgiveness; it is quite another thing to do it under circumstances of being hated, cursed, and maltreated by your enemies. Jesus is practicing what He preached; and by forgiving His enemies He is demonstrating that He is indeed the son of the merciful Father.

The rulers, soldiers, and the one criminal berated Jesus for not saving Himself. But Jesus was not sent to save Himself. In fact, it was His own salvation, His relationship of love with the Father, that energized His mission to save others. Jesus is the saved one who spends Himself to save others. This was the project that guided His life, and this is still the project to which He is faithful as He dies. The exchange with the criminal is a fitting culmination of the life of One who defined Himself as a seeker after the lost (Lk 19:10)

We note in this passage that the rulers, soldiers and the other criminal have all used titles for Jesus – the chosen one, the Christ of God, the King of the Jews. They thought they knew what the titles meant and they judged Jesus by those meanings. However, this criminal does not use titles. He simply addresses Him as "Jesus." The cultural meanings attached to titles do not rule over Jesus. The person of Jesus transforms the inherited meanings of titles. Jesus does not fit into preexisting categories. He breaks those categories to create something new. The criminal who turns to Jesus knows Whom he is turning to. Unlike the persecutors, he does know what he is doing.

And Jesus is waiting. He is eager for someone who engages in the inner work that is necessary for openness and turns to him with the one request He wants to hear. To request the kingdom galvanizes the kingdom-bringer into action. It is God's pleasure to give people the kingdom (Lk 12:32). It is the Father's pleasure to forgive sinners. It is not the divine duty, obligation, or burden. It is the Father's pleasure to pour Himself into the empty bowl of a person. Jesus knows this personally for He experienced this at His baptism: "You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests." (Lk 3:22) In fact, this divine pleasure is essential to His identity, alerting Him to every possibility of passing it on to others. That possibility has just arrived. There is no doubt about what will happen.

The moment of openness becomes the moment of fulfillment. Whenever the repentant sinner turns to the merciful God, it is 'today,' a time of actualization. "TODAY you will be with me in Paradise." There is a correct alignment between human openness to receive – and divine initiative to give. The openness did not produce the initiative to give. The initiative to give was always knocking; the openness merely unlocked the door (Lk 11:9-11) This divine initiative lives in the heart of Jesus, and the criminal has established a

relationship with Jesus. “Remember me” is met by “you will be with me.” (all of this taken from John Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 319-324) TODAY.

OK, so what? Now some of you are sitting there saying ‘He didn’t tell us a joke. It seemed too intrusive after that sorrowful gospel. Where’s the joke?’ Here it is. A little girl was nervous about her medical checkup, so the doctor did his best to put her at ease. As he looked in one ear, he said, “Ooh, I see Big Bird in there!” Then he looked in her mouth and said, “And I believe I see Kermit the Frog in there!” Then the doctor put his stethoscope to the child’s chest and said, ‘I think I can hear Barney in your heart.’ “Oh, no, Doctor,” the child said quickly, ‘I have Jesus in my heart. Barney’s on my underwear.’ Now back to the homily and my 2nd point! We all say we value integrity. The death of Jesus makes clear His integrity. What He said and what He did were of one piece. He did not seek out death; but He died as a martyr, one who valued God’s will more highly than His own life. He taught and lived a nonviolent way of life, holding forgiveness and reconciliation to be absolute values that had to be followed at all costs. When pressure was brought against Him to abandon those values and use whatever powers He had to protect Himself and defeat His attackers, He refused to do so. He died as He lived. This simple yet profound integrity lifts Him above others and recommends His revelation of a forgiving God as truthful. (Shea, IBID., p. 325)

Third, so what about us? How do we live out a life like Christ, a life of integrity? We begin with the end in mind. We remember where we are headed. And we remember how we get there. We have to die. There is nothing morbid about this. It is a fact of life. Everything that lives must die. And that’s what makes all of life so precious. Every single second.

Rachael Naomi Remen tells a story about integrity. A woman in her 30’s came up to Remen at a crowded party. Her name is not given, but for the purposes of simplicity in telling this story, I’m going to call her Ann. Ann was told that Remen worked with the dying. Ann confronted Remen, telling her she resented all this talk about death as something meaningful. Then Ann recounted the horrible death of her husband a number of years earlier. He had been diagnosed with cancer; and as therapy after therapy had failed, he became bitter, lashing out at everyone, rebuffing anyone who tried to comfort him. When he looked back at his young life, he regretted the choices he had made. He died angry and withdrawn. Ann ended her telling of this ordeal with “I do not want to die that way.”

Remen asked her, “So how do you need to live?” The woman looked puzzled. So Remen asked her again. “How do you need to live to be sure that you do not die that way?” This time Ann got it. Remen writes: “She looked past me for a moment, making eye contact with something intensely personal. Then she reached out and touched my hand and turned away into the crowd.” Some months later, Remen received a note from the woman. Ann realized she was not living as authentically as she wanted. There were many things left undone; many roads not taken. She began to revise her life in the light of her death. In her case, life was still tested in the dying, but in a reverse fashion. Contemplating her death started a process that led to her rearranging her life. (adapted from MY GRANDFATHER’S BLESSINGS, p. 300-302)

This is a path that our spiritual tradition recommends. It asks us to move our death from way off in the future to right now. In this position of nearness, death can test our lives and teach us what to do – or not to do. I remember a woman in a parish I served. She had been a nun, left the convent, married, and had 3 teenage children. Her husband suddenly came into a lot of money. They left their modest house and moved into a fine, large one. It was completely redecorated; she was now wearing expensive jewelry and clothes. New cars were the order of the day. Then she was stricken with cancer. Terminal cancer. I went to see her. She gestured around at her new, fine surroundings: “It doesn’t mean a thing to me now.” She went on: “And I went looking for my bible when I came home from the doctor’s when I got the terminal diagnosis; I had lived

here for 6 months and didn't even know where it was. I was a nun for goodness sake! I used to pray several hours every day! I need to get back on track."

In a position of nearness, death can test our lives and teach us what to do. And it has many lessons to contribute to our education. It weans us away from the illusion of immortality. It encourages us to prioritize our activities and focus on what is most important. It instills a sense of freedom, reaffirming our ability to lead a life of integrity. It awakens us to the dangers of procrastination, telling us to get out of our chair and deal with unfinished business. There may be relationships that need reconciling, people who need to be thanked, financial affairs put in order, church priorities realigned, and people told how much they have meant to us. Finally, facing our death opens us up to each moment, cherishing whatever arises in all its fragility. None of us knows how we will die – or when. So meditating on our death is not preparation for a future event. Rather, it tells us how to live so that whenever and however we die, our life will have been fulfilled. (additional help from Shea, IBID, p. 326-327) It will have had integrity. It will have had meaning. Amen.