

**LOVE DIVINE, ALL LOVE EXCELLING**  
**Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, 2019**  
**Luke 23:32-43**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 23:32-43: **Two other men, who were criminals, were also led out to be executed with Him.**

<sup>33</sup> **When they came to the place that is called “The Skull,” they crucified Him there with the criminals, one at His right and the other at His left. <sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them! For they do not know what they are doing.”**

**They divided His clothes among them by casting lots. <sup>35</sup> The people stood there watching. The rulers were also sneering, “He saved others. Let Him save Himself if He is the Christ of God, the Chosen One!”**

<sup>36</sup> **The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him wine-vinegar. <sup>37</sup> They said, “If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!”**

<sup>38</sup> **There was also a written notice above Him, “This is the King of the Jews.”**

<sup>39</sup> **One of the criminals who hung there was blaspheming Him: “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”**

<sup>40</sup> **However, the other criminal rebuked him. He said, “Do you not even fear God? For you are under the same condemnation. <sup>41</sup> We are also being punished justly. For we are getting what we deserve for what we have done. However, this Man has done nothing wrong.”**

<sup>42</sup> **Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!”**

<sup>43</sup> **Jesus told him, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Over the past couple weeks, the emphasis in our Lenten sermons has been on sin which reveals itself in every phase of the Passion history. We have also recognised our own faults and weaknesses, our own sins and transgressions.

However, our journey to the cross must display to us more than our sin. Judas Iscariot clearly saw his sin, yet he went and hanged himself.<sup>1</sup> Seeing our sin and nothing more drives us to despair. That is why we must also see the love of Jesus. It was a look of love that saved Peter when the enormity of his offence dawned upon him. He did not despair, but instead, repented and was saved.<sup>2</sup> Peter saw his sin, but he also saw the Lord’s love. Our pilgrimage with Jesus along the way of sorrows must also condition us to value His love. We must learn not to look down virtuously upon those who crucified the Lord but rather to confess that we ourselves are just as guilty. Having then confessed that, we hunger and thirst for Jesus’ pardoning love.

Jesus’ pardoning love is what we find in our text for today. Jesus speaks words that are intended for sinners as He prays for them to His Father in heaven. It is to sinners that Jesus gives the assurance of a place in heavenly glory. If anyone does not think that they are a sinner, then these words of Jesus mean nothing, in fact, they make no sense, as the Apostle Paul once said, “*an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot know them for they are discerned spiritually,*” (1 Cor. 2:14). On the other hand, if one confesses himself to be a poor and needy sinner, if he beats his breast, asking for God’s mercy,<sup>3</sup> then he must eagerly take to heart a love that is, as hymn 164 says, which we will sing shortly, *a love divine, all love excelling*. This is what Luke wishes to impress upon us today from our text.

It is preached, first of all, in the crucified Christ’s intercession for sinners.

Jesus’ enemies had now accomplished their purpose. Being numbered with transgressors, He was rejected by His people and nailed to the cross where for six hours He hung in agony before dying. His torment was awful, but it was made more terrible by the mockery of the mob that lingered around the cross. Now, as He opened His mouth to speak, what did He say? A word of judgment? That would be well within His rights. They had treated Him wickedly, and the Father had given all judgment to the Son. No, amongst all that was happening, Jesus spoke words of love, a prayer for His murderers. He said, **“Father, forgive them! For they do not know what they are doing.”**

Jesus hangs there despised and rejected of men. All (except for His mother and a few others) have forsaken Him and are through with Him, except for their ongoing taunts. Jesus could rightly say something like, “*I am through with them. They have made their bed in hell. Let them lie there.*” He has worn Himself out in trying to serve and save them. He has not spared Himself, and yet His reward is this cruel ingratitude. Just as Pilate had earlier washed his hands of Jesus, so now Jesus, if He wished, could easily wash His hands of them. However, that was not to be. No, even now *His thoughts are for them*.

In Luke’s Gospel, God’s forgiveness in Jesus is a prominent theme. It begins early in the narrative of Zacharias who says that his

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:5

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:62

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:13

son John will go ahead of the Lord, to prepare His ways, “to give the knowledge of salvation to His people by the forgiveness of their sins,” (Luke 1:77). It then continues with John’s baptism,<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth,<sup>5</sup> the forgiveness of the paralytic<sup>6</sup> and the sinful woman,<sup>7</sup> and the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>8</sup> Luke records a series of absolutions by Jesus, in which forgiveness is expressed by means of His miracles of release and His table fellowship with sinners.

After Luke establishes that Jesus, the bearer of forgiveness, is the foundation of the church,<sup>9</sup> he narrates Jesus’ selection of a cornerstone in Peter, who receives absolution from Jesus when he is called to be His disciple.<sup>10</sup> Jesus’ final words in Luke include the scriptural mandate to preach to all nations repentance to the forgiveness of sins.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is entirely in keeping with Luke’s picture of Jesus that Jesus should ask the Father to forgive those responsible for His crucifixion: not just the soldiers, but also Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, the chief priests, the rulers, and indeed *all people*. This absolution flows from the full and complete atonement Jesus is accomplishing for the sins of the whole world as He speaks these very words. Forgiveness flows from the cross, so how fitting it is that Jesus’ first word from the cross is a word of universal forgiveness, and His final words are to commit His spirit to the Father<sup>12</sup> because atonement is complete, and the forgiveness of sins is based on His death.

What manner of love is this, that the Son of God bears our guilt! He takes the curse upon Himself. He is scourged and mocked. He is crucified and killed so that we, who are sinners, are reconciled to God. The Apostle Paul sums it up when he writes, “*God shows His love for us by this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,*” (Romans 5:8). Christ died, not for righteous people or for those who had helped Him, but for sinners. This is grace.

Jesus’ prayer was not in vain but was immediately and remarkably answered. Then and there a poor sinner repented and was privileged to hear a beautiful promise of love. That is our second consideration.

Luke writes, “**Two other men, who were criminals, were also led out to be executed with Him.**”

One criminal was crucified on the left of Jesus, the other, on the right.<sup>13</sup> They represented humanity. Both are guilty, just as all men are guilty. One repents and is saved while the other hardens himself and is condemned. So also, on the Last Day, there will be those on the right hand and those on the left, the sheep and the goats. There will be those who are saved and those who are condemned.

**<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there was blaspheming Him: “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”**

The suffering Saviour remains silent. He has “*come to search for, and to save, what has been lost,*” (Luke 19:10), and will not judge this man who even in his death-throes mocks and blasphemes Jesus. However, to the other criminal He has a golden word of promise: <sup>43</sup> **Jesus told him, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”**

How did this man come to be so blessed? Like the other, he was a criminal, so terrible in fact that society could do no more than to get rid of him.

Unlike the other criminal, this man showed repentance and faith, and now, Jesus promised that he would enter the fullness of the kingdom that He Himself was preparing and inheriting. The blessing Jesus gave this one criminal was totally undeserved. It was a gift of love. This man’s instruction - his catechesis, had come through watching the passion of Jesus, the simple words of absolution that Jesus spoke over His enemies, and the cruel mocking of the suffering and righteous Messiah. This evildoer on the brink of death and hell is converted by Jesus’ announcement that sin is forgiven by virtue of the cross. He embraced Jesus as the One who saved others, the Christ, and King of the Jews.

This criminal first expressed his repentance by confessing his sin. He said of both he and the other criminal, “**We are also being punished justly. For we are getting what we deserve for what we have done.**” He feared God and recognised that his tortuous death is just punishment for the sins he has committed. He stood under the judgment of God’s wrath and confessed that his guilt merited such punishment.

However, combined with his confession of sin is his confession of faith: he announces that Jesus is the suffering, innocent Messiah. He says, “**However, this Man has done nothing wrong.**” Jesus’ innocence has been a primary theme throughout Luke’s passion narrative, but this is the first time Jesus’ innocence has been announced by a believer. To declare Jesus innocent or righteous is tantamount to declaring that God’s plan of salvation in His righteous Son is just - and that righteousness – justification - comes through that plan. Such a confession glorifies God and recognises His righteousness.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:3

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:18

<sup>6</sup> Luke 5:20-21, 23-24

<sup>7</sup> Luke 7:47

<sup>8</sup> Luke 11:4

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1-4

<sup>10</sup> Luke 5:1-11

<sup>11</sup> Luke 24:47

<sup>12</sup> Luke 23:46

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 27:38

For the penitent criminal, his words constitute a confession of faith in the suffering, innocent Messiah, but he goes on to voice an even stronger confession: **“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!”**

Perhaps the inscription on the cross and the taunts of the soldiers, both of which designated Jesus as King, informed this man’s request regarding Jesus’ entrance into His kingdom. In any event, the king/kingdom motif and the theme of remembrance resonate throughout Luke’s Gospel and come together in a strikingly similar way in the Lord’s Supper dialogue where Jesus speaks of the future advent of the kingdom. In that upper room, He had said to His disciples, *“I tell you, I shall certainly not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God... I tell you, from now on I shall certainly not drink what comes from the vine until the kingdom of God comes...,”* (Luke 22:16-17). That penitent criminal’s request reveals a *remarkable understanding* of the now/not yet tension in the eschatology of God’s kingdom. Now, on the cross, Jesus is King, and now His word bestows forgiveness. Not yet has Jesus entered into His kingdom of glory, yet Jesus’ word of forgiveness now opens the door for this dying criminal to enter the ‘not yet’ kingdom too when it comes - and it will come that same day!

The catechesis of the penitent criminal was brief, and his initiation into the life of Christ came quickly. The dying *“King of the Jews”*<sup>14</sup> who *“saved others”*<sup>15</sup> says, **“Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”**

This is Jesus’ second word from the cross in Luke, and Jesus begins His pronouncement with **“Truly, I tell you...,”** alerting the criminal that what He is about to say has great significance.

The announcement that **“today”** paradise belongs to the penitent criminal emphasises the present reality of future blessings. This inheritance of paradise comes through the crucified flesh of Jesus. That is why Jesus uses incarnational, real presence language with the penitent criminal: **“you will be with Me in paradise.”** Jesus, crucified, is the source of forgiveness for all - even the worst, the least, and the last. With these words, Jesus invites the man to participate in this forgiveness for ever. His words serve to incorporate the man into the body of believers in Christ and to invite him to the ongoing feast of heaven. The penitent criminal is grafted into Jesus’ passion, which Jesus is experiencing at that very moment. Here, the language of Baptism which the Apostle Paul uses is most powerfully illustrated: this sinner is truly united with Jesus in a death like His, and according to Jesus’ promise, he shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His when he, with Him, will be in paradise (Rom. 6:5).

Through our baptism, Christ identifies Himself *with us*; His death has paid for our sins, and His righteousness has been credited to us. His death was on the cross; ours is in Baptism, which gives the benefits of His work on the cross, and because of Christ’s resurrection, new life has already begun for us, and, at Christ’s return, our bodies will be raised to life again.

What manner of love Jesus shows! There is no sin so terrible that He can and will not gladly forgive. The criminal on the cross was the first-fruit of a countless multitude who have since come to Jesus with their load of guilt, desperate and despairing, and He has given them the same wonderful word of promise. They had come to Jesus just as they were, without one plea but that His blood was shed for them, and their robes were washed white in the blood of the Lamb.<sup>16</sup> They trusted in Him, and in such faith, they died, and now, today, they walk with Him in paradise.

Our great High Priest speaks in both of these words of His from the cross. He pleads for sinners, and He absolves the sinner. As He did on Calvary, so He still does today. He is *“the same yesterday and today and for ever,”* (Heb. 13:8). Nothing more needs to be said. After all, it is His words that count.

Dear friends, come to that cross. There Jesus prays, **“Father, forgive them! For they do not know what they are doing.”** He is praying for you who are a sinner just like those around the cross. **“Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise,”** He promises, and that same promise He has given to you too. Let us all kneel at the foot of that cross and adore His “love divine; all love excelling.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Almighty and ever-living King of all creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father, whom all the heavenly hosts praise and glorify, hear our prayer.

We thank You, heavenly Father, for Your limitless love in the gift of Christ Your Son, for the sacrifice of His life on the cross for us, for the promise of eternal life through His death and resurrection, and for the cleansing of our consciences from dead works by His obedience.

Increase our joy in Your rich blessings: the forgiveness of our sins, deliverance from death and the power of the devil, and the assurance of everlasting life, which Jesus’ crucifixion have obtained for us.

We thank You that in Christ You have spoken to us the words of life. Inspire us to love and worship Him in spirit and in truth. Give us that faith that sees in Him the eternal Godhead, the everlasting I AM, the one who is the same yesterday, today, and for

<sup>14</sup> Luke 23:37-38

<sup>15</sup> Luke 23:35

<sup>16</sup> Revelation 7:14

ever. Grant that we may always trust in His mercy, be faithful to His Word, and obey His commandments, and honour Him by losing our lives for His sake and for the Gospel's, as He lost His life to gain us.

In mercy, cleanse and strengthen Your Church, that it may be saved from all weakness and failure, and be filled with power for holy service. Govern the nations on earth, that people everywhere may live in harmony with their fellowmen and serve one another's needs. Pour out Your grace on our homes and on all schools, that the young may be trained for a useful life on earth, and be made ready for the life to come. Bless all who work honestly with mind and hand to provide those things we need for this life. Give all people everywhere joy in doing their daily work, and grant that they may do it as those who are accountable to You.

Help us to use our abilities and possessions faithfully, for everything belongs to You. Forgive us for being selfish and for misusing our gifts. Comfort the suffering, the deprived, the burdened, and the aged. Be the help of the needy, the protector of the helpless, and the Saviour of all people. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

## FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Isaiah 43:16-21

<sup>16</sup> This is what the LORD has said — who makes a road through the sea and a path through the mighty waters, <sup>17</sup> who leads out chariots and horses, an army and reinforcements together, so that they lie down and do not get back up, so that they are extinguished and snuffed out like a wick — <sup>18</sup> “Do not remember former things and do not pay attention to events of long ago! <sup>19</sup> Look! I am going to do a new thing. It is springing up already. Do you not recognise it? Indeed, I shall make a roadway through the wilderness and rivers through the desert. <sup>20</sup> Wild animals, jackals and ostriches, will honour Me, because I shall provide water in the wilderness and rivers through the desert to give drink to My own chosen people, <sup>21</sup> the people whom I have formed for Myself. They will proclaim My praise.”

Philippians 3:4b-14

<sup>4b</sup> although I myself have confidence even in what is bodily. If anyone else thinks that he has confidence in something bodily, I have more. <sup>5</sup> I was circumcised on the eighth day; I belong to the race of Israel, to the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents. Concerning the Law, I was a Pharisee. <sup>6</sup> As for zeal, I used to persecute the church. As for the righteousness that is in the Law I was blameless. <sup>7</sup> However, I have reckoned those things that were gains to me as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> However, more than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have lost all things and consider them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to be found in Him, not having my own righteousness that is from the Law but having the righteousness that is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that is from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ, the power of His resurrection and fellowship in His sufferings, as I am conformed to His death, <sup>11</sup> if, by any means, I shall attain to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> I do not mean that I have already obtained this or have already been made perfect but eagerly strive to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ has also taken hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Fellow-Christians, I do not think I have taken hold of it. However, I do one thing: I forget the things that are behind and strain toward the things that are ahead. <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Luke 20:9-20

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus began to tell the people this parable: “A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it out to tenant-farmers and left home for a long time. <sup>10</sup> At the right time he sent a servant to the tenant-farmers that they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. However, the tenant-farmers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>11</sup> Then he sent another servant. They also beat him, treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>12</sup> Then he sent a third servant. They wounded this one, too and threw him out. <sup>13</sup> Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What am I to do? I shall send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.’

<sup>14</sup> “However, when the tenant-farmers saw him, they discussed it among themselves. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours!’

<sup>15</sup> “They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

“Therefore, what will the owner of the vineyard do to them?

<sup>16</sup> He will come and destroy these tenant-farmers and give the vineyard to others.”

When the people heard this, they said, “May this not happen!”

<sup>17</sup> Jesus looked straight at them and asked, “Therefore, what does this Scripture-passage mean: ‘The Stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone’? <sup>18</sup> Everyone who falls on that Stone will be dashed in pieces and, if that Stone falls on anyone, It will scatter him like dust.”

<sup>19</sup> The scribes and the Chief Priests looked for a way to lay hands on Him immediately, because they knew that He had spoken this parable against them but were afraid of the people.

<sup>20</sup> They kept a close watch on Him and sent spies who pretended to be righteous men, that they might catch Him in what He said, to hand Him over to the power and authority of the governor.