2nd Wednesday in Lent
West Henrietta - 1962

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 23: 42,43 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.

Some years ago a number of college boys were on their way home for Easter vacation. They were driving along at a reasonable speed when all of a sudden two cars met them on top of a hill - one trying to pass the other. There was the usual screeching of brakes, the attempt to dodge one another. But they met head on. The cars were a wreck. Three people were killed. One of the boys sitting in the back seat flew through the windshield and past the oncoming car by several feet. But there wasn't a scratch on him. He was entirely unhurt. A few days later this boy was sitting with his pastor telling him the story; and he concluded with this remark: It is a miracle of God that I am still alive. The pastor agreed: You certainly were mighty close to eternity, and then he added: If you had died in that moment, where would you be today? Without any hesitation or doubt, the boy replied Why, I would be in heaven now.

This boy believed what the Bible so gloriously teaches: that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus; and that when a believer dies, his soul goes to be with Jesus in heaven without delay. It is a pity that these two comforting doctrines are being denied today, even by some so-called Christian churches. If we give up these two doctrines of the Bible, then we have given up our hope, our peace, our salvation. I pray that as we listen to the words of Jesus to the penitent malefactor, our faith in these Bible truths may be strengthened.

We know very little about this penitent malefactor who turned to the Savior in the eleventh hour of his life. Yet, the little we do know has eternal significance. Tradition has given him the name Dysmas; the Bible calls him a thief We need not speculate as to what his crimes had been. This we know, he spent his life in doing evil. His life was so wicked that the government had to give him the death sentence; so rotten that he himself had to admit while hanging on the cross: I am getting the just reward for my crimes. Even while on the Cross, in his braggadocio and feigned boldness, he also mocked. He joined the mob in ridiculing and

cursing this Jesus of Nazareth.

This man wasn't saved by what he did! What he did was evil. What saved this malefactor was the grace of God-- the mercy of God alone! It may all be that when he was a little boy, his mother had spoken to him about the promised Messiah, the Savior who was to come. It may all be that one of the early Christians had the courage to speak to him about the folly of his sinful life, and about this Jesus, the Friend of sinners, who had dared to pronounce God's forgiveness to others. At any rate, death brings earnest and serious thoughts - thoughts about God, about the hereafter. He knew that his hours were numbered.

Yet, even in death he tried to put up a bold front. To prove to himself and others that he was a brave man, he joined in cursing Jesus. His mockery was a kind of smoke screen to hide from himself the full awareness of his own guilt. But to his amazement Jesus didn't curse back. He prayed, Father, forgive them; for the know not what they do. There was love in this man Jesus - love in His prayer. And the curse words that the malefactor still had on his tongue would not come out, because he knew that Jesus was also praying for him.

Then, about this time the Roman soldiers came around with the three scrol and a hammer and nailed these scrolls at the top of the three crosses; the scrolls stating the crimes for their crucifixion. The malefactor must have shuddered when they posted his crimes above his head. Then, being a curious man, he bent his neck to see the superscription above the head of Christ. To his amazement, no crimes we listed. Instead, the superscription proclaimed simply, This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.... Surely, he had heard of Him. Many people thought He was the Messiah promised of God. Gradually God's grace began to take a hold in his heart. The behavior of Christ made a deep impression on him. He began to recognize his guilt. Never had he seen it quite so clearly. Penitently he confessed, We receive the due reward of our deeds. Rebuking the other malefactor who was still railing against Jesus, he said: Wait a minute, this Man has done nothing amiss.

What Christian courage and faith! Men were mocking Christ, cursing Christ sticking out their tongues at Him. No one dared to say a word for Christ.... except

this malefactor. Though all the world should be against Him, he, at least, would dare to speak for Him! Have you ever done as much? Here is proof that something had happened in his heart. Turning to Jesus, he said: Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom. The people considered Jesus an outcast, a criminal; the malefactor calls Him Lord. The people thought Jesus would be dead and gone in a few hours; the malefactor believed that He would live again and asks to be remembered. Pontius Pilate scoffed at the kingdom of Christ; that malefactor had complete confidence that it was coming. As Robertson Nicoll has said, this man Dysmas was the only one in all the world who really believed in Jesus at that moment. All the others were disillusioned, fear-bound, and hopeless. Only this thief who hung on a cross by His side had faith enough in this broken, bleeding, wounded, defeated, fly-infested figure to believe that one day He should inherit a Kingdom. Humbly he pleaded, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom. Suddenly, instantly, the gates of heaven flew open for Dysmas, and he received the assurance of complete and full forgiveness. There were no conditions attached, no If's. There was no purgatory to face. God never attaches any condition to forgiveness. He does not say, Your forgiveness will go into effect when you have met certain requirements. But for this penitent criminal there came the promise: Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.

In paradise. Adam and Eve were placed into paradise. When they ruined their first paradise by sin, Jesus came and prepared another paradise, which we usually call heaven. To this place Jesus promised to take this dying believer. Pointedly He assured him: Today you shall be WITH ME. And where did Jesus go after His death - into a coma or purgatory? Before His crucifixion Jesus told His disciples: In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. When Jesus died He went to heaven; and Jesus promises this malefactor: Today you shall be with Me. Thus St. Paul also confessed: I have a desire to depart (to die)

and to be with Christ, which is far better.

When a believer dies, his soul goes to be with Jesus immediately. What a comfort this is to us Christians when we have to stand next to the grave of a de one! We know that our loved ones who died believing in Jesus as their Savior are with Jesus in heaven now. Their souls are not flitting around in nowhere; neither are they suffering in purgatory. Like the malefactor, they are with Jesus in paradise. St. John, in his vision of heaven, caught a glimpse of the saints and martyrs standing before the throne of the Lamb who was slain for our sins, and he shouted: Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth.

What a comfort this truth is to us every day of our lives! With St. Paul we can say, For me to live is Christ, for me to die is gain!

What a comfort this truth is to us when our hour of death arrives! Thoma Hobbes wrote that death is a leap into the dark. We know that death for us is the entrance into heaven. What a thrill that's going to be. As soon as we close our eyes in death here, they will open on the other side. We will see the angels, Jesu heaven, with all the glories thereof. During the last war a young co-pilot who had his plane so badly wrecked on a mission over enemy territory that it seemed impossible to reach base with their sputtering motor, wrote his pastor after they had finally landed safely: We had given up all hope of reaching land. But, somehow, when I remembered all that Jesus had done for me and the promises He gave us about heaven, I became unafraid. I knew that in case my body went into the water with th plane, my soul would keep right on flying - flying to be with Jesus in heaven. Whe the Lusitania, a British passenger ship, was hit by a German torpedo off the coast of Ireland in 1915, many were crying for help and yelling in despair. But a Christian man on the ship remarked: This will be the greatest thrill of my life. Death will also be that to each of us, if, of course, we are repentant believers in Jesus, like the malefactor on the cross. May our blessed Savior grant it.

Amen.