The Second Wednesday in Lent
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Rolling Meadows, Illinois

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 23: 39-43: ONE OF THE CRIMINALS WHO WERE HANGED RAILED AT HIM, SAYING, "ARE YOU NOT THE CHRIST? 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 JUSTLY; FOR WE ARE RECEIVING THE DUE REWARD OF OUR DEEDS; BUT THIS MAN HAS DONE NOTHING WRONG." AND HE SAID, "JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME IN YOUR KINGLY POWER." AND HE SAID TO HIM, "TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."

Jesus HUNG on the CROSS not to ETERNALIZE MAN'S SIN - - but to put an END to it. He SUFFERED NOT to INCREASE man's misery - - but to REMOVE it. He BLEED and DIED not to PERPETUATE our DESPAIR over the VANITY and FUTILITY of life - - - but to snatch us from inevitable SELF-DESTRUCTION. It was NOT His PURPOSE to move us to SYMPATHETIC TEARS at the unavoidable defeat of everything that is GOOD and GREAT - - but HE DIED to make us VICTORS over SIN, DEATH, AND DESPAIR.

Jesus' CROSS was NOT the END - - but the GREAT BEGINNING. It was NOT DEFEAT at all - - but the GRAND VICTORY by which you and I are NOW ABLE to WIN the VICTORY in the BATTLE of LIFE.

Now the question is: Who was the 1st to DISCOVER VICTORY in the cross of Jesus? - - - - Who was the 1st to SHARE in His TRIUMPH?

There were His DISCIPLES. They had GIVEN UP EVERYTHING to FOLLOW Him. They had let Him send them into a HOSTILE WORLD to PROCLAIM the GOOD NEWS. LOYALLY they CONFESSED and PROCLAIMED Him - - - and in His NAME had done MIRACLES. Were THEY the 1st?

There was His MOTHER - - - who CLUNG to Him as only a mother can CLING to her SON. She gave BIRTH to Him after FAITHFULLY TRUSTING in God's PROMISE. She raised Him and observed His DEVELOPMENT with an ANXIOUS and CARING HEART. Was she the 1st to SHARE in the VICTORY of Jesus?

Or was it those whose DISEASES Jesus had HEALED - - or those whom He had RAISED from the DEAD?

Or what about the theologians - - those who in DEVOTION and MEDITATION had given to the SCRIPTURES a LIFETIME of SEARCHING STUDY - and had HELD FAST to those PROMISES of God which are there - - - - - Were THEY the 1st?

Or how about the LAW and ORDER PEOPLE - the SOLDIERS and EXECUTIONERS - those CONSCIENTIOUS PEOPLE who were DEVOTED to their DUTY - who took their calling SERIOUSLY and hoped

to PLEASE GOD by doing their duty in FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE to their SUPERIORS - - - - Were THEY the 1st?

~~I'm sure I don't have to ANSWER these questions~~. You KNOW the ANSWERS. None of these were 1st - - - and that is how God turns everything UP-SIDE-DOWN. The ONE to whom our Lord COMES with the PRIVILEGE of being the FIRST to SHARE His VICTORY and HONOR and GLORY was NOT FAITHFUL - NOT LOVING - NOT a SCHOLAR - or a man BOUND to LAW and ORDER - - - - but he was an OUTCAST. He was a man who had GROSSLY SINNED AGAINST SOCIETY and trampled on God's COMMANDMENTS. He was a MALEFACTOR ~~and a ROBBER~~ - - who had ATTACKED his own COUNTRYMEN on the HIGHWAY - - - and taken everything that they had - and perhaps even MURDERED THEM! Our text tells us that a SHARE in CHRIST'S VICTORY was given to one who could NOT CLAIM ANY DISTINCTION for HIMSELF. Jesus' VICTORY was SHARED by one who DESERVED NOTHING but EXECUTION.

NONE of the others had FAITH enough to SEE THIS. The disciples FLED - his mother was FROZEN with HELPLESS ANGUISH - the THEOLOGIANS came to their HONEST CONVICTION that Jesus could be nothing but a BLASPHEMER - the LAW-and-ORDER and CONSCIENTIOUS PEOPLE crucified Him in OBEDIENCE to their ORDERS.

I dare say that it was their VIRTUES that became their DOWN-FALL. The disciples FLED because of their FAITHFULNESS - His mother was SHOCKED into DISBELIEF by her LOVE - the THEOLOGIANS CONDEMNED Him because of their KNOWLEDGE of SCRIPTURE - the SODLIERS CRUCIFIED Him because of their OBEDIENCE and CONSCIENTIOUSNESS.

All of them in one way or another REJECT the CROSS ~~and CRUCIFIXION~~ of JESUS that would bring them to a CROSS ~~and CRUCIFIXION too~~ too - - - and ~~BREAK THEM UTTERLY~~. It is their VIRTUE and their MORALITY and their GOOD DEEDS come between them and the CROSS - - - - and bring about their FALL. They INSIST that THEY are RIGHT in SPITE of the CROSS which God IMPOSES. They want their OWN EXPECTATIONS ~~in~~ and CLAIMS. They INSIST ~~in~~ on being RIGHT even AGAINST GOD! But in maintaining that they are RIGHT - - - they remain BLIND and DEAF! And the CROSS becomes for them NOTHING but FOLLY - - - the GREAT FAILURE - - - the plain INSANITY that it must be for EVERY UPRIGHT and RESPECTABLE PERSON.

The only one CRUSHED by ~~THIS~~ THE CROSS is one who is HANGING on a CROSS HIMSELF - - - the MALEFACTOR - - - who says: "AND WE INDEED JUSTLY, FOR WE RECEIVE THE DUE REWARD OF OUR DEEDS!" He is the ONLY ONE of all the PEOPLE AROUND JESUS on CALVARY who once and for all has GIVEN UP all of his OWN CLAIMS and his OWN RIGHTS. His only right is to

DIE the DEATH of a CRIMINAL.

The DEATH PENALTY is all that he JUSTLY DESERVED. Yet, he is the ONLY ONE who knows that he is a SINNER - and therefore he ACCEPTS the CROSS for HIMSELF and AFFIRMS it! - - - ~~he ACCEPTS the CROSS of JESUS!~~

As Saint Augustine once said, "The MALEFACTOR becomes the 1st EVANGELIST." Everyone else sees Jesus ONLY as a MAN DYING in utter HELPLESSNESS and HOPELESSNESS. Only the MALEFACTOR - the PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE - realizes that this INNOCENT MAN on the CROSS next to him can CHANGE EVERYTHING - - - - - - and he DARES to ASK something of Him who is SO WEAK that he cannot quench HIS OWN THIRST. But HE SEES the SPLENDOR of the VICTORS CROWN on JESUS' HEAD - - - and he says, "LORD, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGLY POWER."

This ROBBER was the 1st to SHARE in the VICTORY of the CROSS! And to HIM - - - and Jesus does not let him WAIT - - - He says: "TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE." And as LUTHER says, "This THUG is the REAL SAINT in the New Testament."

Do we SEE OURSELVES THERE? Before God there is NO DIFFERENCE between LOVELESSNESS and MURDER - between HATRED and HOMICIDE - between SUSPICION and HIGHWAY ROBBERY.

We are ALL MALEFACTORS! We are ALL ROBBERS - SECRETLY or PUBLICLY - whether we are ready to ADMIT IT or NOT.

If we would SHARE in HIS VICTORY, we must CONFESS our SINS - we must KNOW WHO we ARE - "POOR MISERABLE SINNERS" - - and we must UNDERSTAND then that Christ's VICTORY is FOR US. And then Jesus comes to us and says, "TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME." He comes to us at the HOLY TABLE - in His OWN SUPPER - ~~but~~ where we can have COMMUNION with Him - - - and there REMEMBER HIS WORDS - that you are "WITH ME" - - - and then we have ENTERED into the "TODAY" which is the GREAT DAY of JOY. We are WITH HIM NOW - - - as we COME like the MALEFACTOR CAME. Amen.