

Wisdom offers a welcome

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[0 : 00] Luke 23 verses 32 to 43. Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

When they came to the place called the skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, He saved himself. He saved others.

Let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One. The soldiers also came and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was a written notice above him which read, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him.

[1 : 04] Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us. But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God, he said, since you are under the same sentence.

We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus answered him, Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. Amen. Good to look at you now at Luke chapter 23.

So Tim read from it earlier and reminded us that it was also the same passage that we read and spoke about last week. So not all of you will have been watching last week.

But we were just thinking about the wisdom that Jesus shows from a very dark place. The words that Jesus speaks from the cross. And the first thing that Jesus says from the cross is a prayer.

[2 : 06] Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. What an extraordinary moment of courage and love. You know, it's a sort of mind-blowing, category-shattering love, that, isn't it?

To pray for forgiveness for the people who are murdering you. And that kind of love is undeserved. And in Christianity, in the Bible, undeserved love is often spoken of as grace.

God shows us grace. He shows us a love we don't deserve. When Jesus prays for his enemies to be forgiven on the cross, he's showing grace, a love that they don't deserve, that they can't earn.

So this week, I just want to think about what Jesus says about, Today, you'll be with me in paradise. That's a promise that he makes to one of the thieves who's been crucified with him.

And I want to think about this, just the welcome that Jesus extends to this dying man. If we think about the words of wisdom that Jesus speaks from the darkness of the cross, there's words of forgiveness, and there are also words of welcome.

[3 : 24] Earlier this year, in fact, just before lockdown began, I was in a place called Knoxville, Tennessee, visiting a church called Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church. That's a church that's funded Anna Lauren's post for the last few years.

And now as Cornerstone takes on Anna Lauren's salary, Cedar Springs are helping fund Lear's post. And when I was there, one of the guys who was speaking at the conference that I was attending is this guy who's called Yasser Eric.

He's Sudanese. He was brought up in a family of Islamic fundamentalists, a very large and influential clan in Sudan that he belonged to.

His uncle was head of the secret police in Khartoum. A very strict Islamic family who were taught from the youngest age that it was their duty and their responsibility to kill Christians.

Growing up, Yasser only knew one Christian, a boy called Zachariah, that went to his school. And annoyingly for Yasser, Zachariah was the kindest, friendliest, most joyful and loving kid in the whole school.

[4 : 40] And that actually just made Yasser hate him and despise him all the more. And he hated Zachariah so much that eventually he and some of his friends, Yasser and some of his friends, decided to kill this young Christian boy.

And so they waited for him in woodland near their village. And they ambushed him, attacked him, beat him and left him for dead.

And Zachariah was never at school again, never seen in the village again. Years later, Yasser's nephew falls very ill.

He's in hospital. He's in a coma for several weeks. And the doctors have said that this nephew has no hope of recovery. Yasser goes to the hospital and he's sitting beside his nephew's bed one day when two Coptic Christians arrive and come into the room.

And having heard the boy is very sick, they ask Yasser, may we pray for your nephew? Well, Yasser wants to say no, but in his culture, you can't tell people not to pray.

[5 : 55] So he says, yes, go ahead and pray. And when these two Coptic men pray, Yasser is blown away because they talk to God so naturally as if God is right there with them.

And for the first time in several weeks, the boy opens his eyes and he's healed. And Yasser asks, why? Why did these Christians come to pray for a sick boy they don't even know?

How could they be? And eventually, Yasser becomes a Christian. After being converted to Christianity, his family disown him. They have a symbolic funeral where they carry a coffin with his name and bury it.

He is banished and shunned from his family. Forever. He has to flee the Sudan. He goes to Egypt to study the Bible. And when he's in Egypt, at the Bible college, one day a visiting pastor comes and speaks to him.

And the visiting pastor says, do you remember me? And Yasser says, no, I don't. I'm sorry. I've got no idea who you are. And this visiting pastor opens up his Bible.

[7 : 02] And on the inside cover of the pastor's Bible, Yasser's name is written out. And Yasser's amazed. He says, how do you know my name? And the guy says, I'm Zachariah.

I've prayed for you every day because I saw how much you hated me. And Yasser's mind was blown because this is grace.

Love for enemies. Blessing those who persecute you. Love for those who don't deserve it. So I really want to say, right at the start of the sermon, we are saved by grace alone.

Here's a thief dying on a cross. There's nothing he can do to save himself. It's not about what we do. It's about what God has done for us.

We bring nothing to the table. Through Jesus, God offers us forgiveness, eternal life, paradise, as it's spoken of here.

[8 : 03] Through the week, as you think back to this morning, what was Neil talking about? I want us to remember that then, that when we come to God, God doesn't just say, I forgive you, go in peace.

God actually says, I forgive you, come with me. He welcomes us into his family, into relationship, into community, into life with him now, and life with him forever.

And so that's the promise that we see here. An amazing promise to this dying thief. Today, you'll be with me in paradise.

Now, if you know me at all well, you'll know that I'm not the most observant person in the world. So I've lived in Morningside for the last 10 years. And in the street, just behind the house where we live, I found a few weeks ago, during lockdown, I was out for a walk, I found this thing.

It's called the Hanging Stain. And the Hanging Stain is on Braid Road, the road parallel to the one I live on. And it talks about two highway robbers, Thomas Kelly and Henry O'Neill, the last highway men in Scotland to be hanged.

[9 : 18] And they were hung on the site of Braid Road in 1815 for their crimes. So two highway thieves killed on the Braid Road in Edinburgh as they robbed somebody.

That's the Hanging Stains. That's the stones where the posts were, where they were hung. And so it's amazing to think of people being put to death, robbers being killed here in Edinburgh last century, or two centuries ago now, or else in Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago.

Think about what's going on around Jesus. Dr. George McLeod, who was part of the Iona community, said this, Jesus was not crucified between two candles in a cathedral, but on a cross between two thieves, on a town garbage heap, the kind of place where cynics talk smut, thieves

curse, and soldiers gamble.

So imagine the scene as these thieves are dying. It's dark, it's gloomy, it's miserable. This is a violent place.

There's a lot of cruelty and brutality. The sun is hot. The mob is angry. You can smell the burning garbage, and you can smell the blood and the sweat, the urine and the feces of the dying men.

[10:45] So this is not a place of poetry, or music, or birdsong, or beauty, or kindness. There's no refuge here. There's nothing soothing. There's no escape from the torment.

Jesus tastes death, slow, lingering, agonizing, heartbreaking, soul-crushing death. And so do the men who are alongside them.

And one of these men cries out in bitter anger towards God. And one of them cries out to God for help. Both of them facing death.

Both of them asking this great question, of course, what happens when we die? What happens when we die? Well, according to Jesus, if we trust in him, then we are immediately, and without any delay, welcomed into paradise when we die.

Today, Jesus says to the thief, you will be with me in paradise. Jesus himself is about to die. What happens when Jesus dies?

[11:56] Well, immediately that Jesus dies, his soul goes to be with his father in paradise. His body will lie lifeless and inanimate until the father raises him in the third day.

But immediately he dies, his soul is with the father in eternal glory. If we trust in Jesus Christ, then when we die, our souls will go straight to be with Jesus in paradise in eternal bliss.

Our body will be left inanimate and lifeless until the resurrection day. And the great emphasis here then is today, immediately on death, the believer goes to be with God in paradise.

paradise. Jesus is teaching us that the believer who is dying is close to rest and close to glory.

The minute we die, we are in his presence forever. So Jesus is offering a welcome to this thief and to us, to paradise.

[13:01] He holds the door open and he reaches out his hand and he's beckoning us in. He's saying, don't miss this. This paradise, this place of bliss and rest is not to be missed.

Eternal life with Jesus is not a disappointing afterthought. It's not an extra tagged on at the end of life. It's the main event. Life now in this world is just the warm up, the prequel.

And Jesus is saying, the real thing, the real deal is waiting for you. He's holding the door open and he is ready to welcome us. This word, paradise, is a Persian word and it's used for a beautiful garden, usually a garden that belonged to a king.

So think about Holyrood Palace. It's got a park, doesn't it? Holyrood Park and it's the royal parkland. The hill, the loch, they could hunt there, they could relax there as a family.

So think about a beautiful palace, a stately home with amazing parkland and lakes and rivers and trees and woods and meadows and flowers and lawns where the king goes to relax and privacy with his family.

[14:19] That's what the Persians meant by paradise, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the great palace parks that belong to the most powerful monarchs in the world.

And that's the picture that Jesus uses here for this dying man, a man who's thirsty in terrible physical agony. Jesus puts before him a picture of life that is eternal, that is gentle, that is soothing, that is restful and shaded and refreshing, a place of friendship and laughter and goodness.

Jesus is saying to this man, your death is not an end, it's a beginning, it's a door into the true reality that has been prepared for you.

That's the promise of Jesus. Today you will be with me in paradise. That promise is made in response to a prayer. And the prayer comes from one of these thieves who's dying beside Jesus. Now, you may not be that religious and you may not be that prayerful and for lots of people prayer is kind of baffling. You know, how do I pray? Does God hear?

[15:39] You know, what's the point? So, this prayer, I really love this prayer from the thief because it's a reminder that very short prayers can be effective and life-changing.

This prayer is simple and short and your prayers can be simple and short but very effective. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Remember me. It's so simple but so profound, so personal but so amazing. So, prayer is about simple words not saintly words.

This is a prayer anyone can pray. Remember me. It's a humble plea for help. He's not promising anything. He's not offering anything. He's not entering into some kind of plea deal or bargain with God.

He's just saying remember me. It's a humble ask and it's not from a saintly man, is it? This guy is not Mother Teresa. He's a thief who's been killed for his crimes.

[16:48] He's a man without hope. Anyone can pray this prayer. It's not for popes or priests or nuns or ministers or bishops or good people or churchgoers.

This man didn't go to church. He went to prison. He wasn't a minister. He was a murderer. He didn't turn his life around and reform his ways. It's too late for that.

He's only got one hope. That hope is Jesus and so he humbly says to Jesus, will you remember me? And that's true for all of us.

It's not what we offer. It's not the bargain we make. It's not the life we've lived that counts with God. It's just making that humble ask, Lord, remember me.

That's kind of throwing, projecting all our hope onto Jesus that he will be merciful and kind towards us. Who's he asking?

[17:44] Well, it's amazing, isn't it? He says, remember me when you come into your kingdom. So he's here dying beside Jesus and initially we know from the other gospels, he gave Jesus such a hard time.

But as things go on, he starts to change his attitude to Jesus and suddenly his eyes are open to recognize that the man dying beside him is a king and he's not any ordinary king.

He's the king of kings. He's the king who's going to come back in his kingdom. He's going to come back from death. He's the Messiah. He's blind at first to the real Jesus but then his eyes are opened.

He, in the end, is the only one who will speak up for Jesus at the cross. What changed him? How is it that this man sees what no one else is seeing at that moment?

Because there are two thieves, aren't there? Both are equally near to Jesus. Both hear and see the same things. Both are dying.

[18:51] Both are in great pain. But these two men have such different ends. One dies in sin with a bitter, hard, angry heart.

And one dies in peace saved by Jesus. Jesus. Because Jesus opened the eyes of one of them and melted his heart.

The question that begs, of course, is which one are you? You're the guy who's going to be hard towards Jesus to the very end or are you going to and the other God to soften your heart?

It's a reminder, isn't it, that we can't, we're not in control ultimately of our own destiny or outcome. It's God that softens one heart and hardens another.

God says this, that he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy. There is nothing more humbling than that. To know that our destiny is out of our control.

[19:53] It rests in God's hands. He's sovereign, we're not. Salvation, our salvation, is his work from beginning to end.

And so, the New Testament teaches us all we can do is cry out for help. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner, is the prayer that Jesus teaches to us.

And Jesus says this, if we pray that prayer, we will never be turned away. All who come to me, he says, I will in no wise cast out.

So God is saying to you, cry out, be like that thief. Because, it's God who changed him. And it's God who will change you.

Another kind of notorious bad guy, Yasser Eric wasn't the nicest person in the world. Another notorious bad guy was John Newton, slave trader.

[20:57] Later, Christian minister and hymn writer wrote the song Amazing Grace. And he says this, I once was blind. But now I see. His eyes too were opened.

They were opened on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic, carrying slaves from West Africa to the Caribbean. And that slave was caught in a, the slave ship was caught in a terrible storm.

so, so bad was the storm, so long, so severe, that they feared that the ship would break up. And at one point, John Newton was asked to go up and take the helm of the ship, but was delayed from doing so.

And so somebody was sent up in his place and the guy who went up before John Newton and took the helm of the ship was hit by a wave, swept over the side of the ship and he drowned.

So then John Newton has to go up and take the helm. And he starts to think, what if I had died? What if that had been me and I'd been swept away over the side of the ship?

[22 : 05] I, I would have had no hope if I had to face God today. And then he started to think, I need to ask God for forgiveness. And then his next thought was, but look at the life I've lived, the things I've done.

I don't deserve forgiveness. There's nothing I can do to persuade God to forgive me. And then he said this to himself. He said this, so I decided to ask God for a forgiveness that I did not deserve and that I could not earn.

That was amazing. That was grace. That's what I need to ask God for this morning. A forgiveness I don't deserve and I cannot earn.

And that's what the thief asked for on the cross. Give me a forgiveness that I don't deserve and that I cannot earn. And that's what I would really say to you.

Ask God today for forgiveness for all your sin. You don't deserve it. You can't earn it. But he is full of grace and he will wash away every sin from your life and welcome you.

[23 : 19] He doesn't just say I forgive you go in peace. He says I forgive you come with me into the future that he has prepared for you in his son Jesus Christ.

Let me pray and then we'll sing our last song. Lord Jesus Christ thank you for the future that you have been prepared for your people. Thank you that Jesus said I am going ahead of you to prepare a place for you.

And if I go there and prepare a place for you then I will come again to take you to be with me where I am. That if we trust you Jesus you will forgive us and you will welcome us and you will welcome us into your presence before your face in your eternal bliss forever.

May that be the hope that each of us has today and always. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.