

“And he said, Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. And He said to him, Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:42-43)

1) **Who was the Good Thief** that came to Our Lord’s defense upon the cross and was given the gift of eternal life?

- Certain traditions claim that as a child, he was cured of leprosy after he was placed in the water that was used to wash the infant Jesus. It was said The Good Thief’s mother had provided the family with refuge in a cave on route to Egypt and in thanks for her hospitality, Our Lord choose to cleanse her son of his vile disease with the water that had touched the sacred flesh of the Saviour.
- Later in life, he lost his way and became a common thief, though many now suspect that the reason for his crucifixion was that he was a Revolutionary. BXVI suggested he was a follower of Barabbas, known as a Zealots and Scarii (dagger wielder).
- These were Jewish freedom fighters who used violence, assassination and public riots to seek to drive out Roman occupation, resulting in Mass crucifixions in Judea and Galilee and winning varying degrees of contempt and support of armed resistance.
- On Mt Calvary, we have unfolding before us a contrast between a man of violence with the Man of non-violence.
- Names have been given to the Good Thief. Since he was on right side of Jesus, he has been called (Dysmas or Joathas). St Mark tells us that early on during the crucifixion, the Good Thief might have sneered at Christ (Mk 15:23). His conversion in final hour of his life is now being made manifest: He does not see Christ’s death as a demise but he looks forward to the coming royal kingdom.
- St Jerome Commentary: Dismas calls him Jesus (this is the only time in any of the Gospel accounts that someone refers to Jesus by his name only and not other title like the Son of

God or Son of David, etc), unique as most call him Lord, Rabbi but here we have a touching familiarity and testament to what St Luke will show us in the Acts of the Apostles when he recounts how St. Peter declares that salvation comes through faith and witness to name of Jesus in Acts (Acts 4:12).

- Neuhaus: The first person to be so familiar is a convicted criminal who is the last person to speak to Jesus before he dies.

2) **Image of Final Judgment:** CCC 1021: death puts an end to human life and the time to accept or reject the divine grace of Christ. The words to Good Thief speak of his final destiny and the need for repentance before this life expires.

- Notable that Dismas is crucified on the right side of Christ. Church entrances in Gothic Cathedrals would typically have depictions of the Last Judgment, with Christ sitting in the centre on his throne, to his right being the souls of just who were enjoying paradise and on his left the souls of the damned being tormented and often devoured by Satan. To pass under these entranceways was to remind you of the finality of judgment and need for repentance in this life. To repent and seek forgiveness would be to stand on the right hand of salvation, to reject doing so to be condemned to the left hand of perdition.
- Dismas and Gesmas, crucified on either side of Christ, become an image of the Last Judgment. We have a contrast taking place, on the right is Dismas who will repent and be forgiven while Gesmas stands on the left, with the same opportunity to repent and be forgiven but opts to ridicule Christ and demand He use his kingly power to free him from the Cross (though Neuhaus observes might be a touch of goodness in him as he does ask that Jesus save himself and the two thieves, not only thinking about himself, though

whatever goodness was in his intention did not lead him to overcome his anger and rage and seek forgiveness from Christ).

- Neuhaus makes the astute observation that “more accurately, the Good Thief is also a goat who was made an honorary sheep just before his time ran out.” Lest we become too sentimental or uncritical in realizing that the Good Thief was a man of violence and sin who also corresponded to the grace to repent before it was too late!
- We see too in their suffering how pain does not always bring contrition but can incur bitterness, resentment and scorn. This was the path Gesmas took on the cross, to allow the suffering to drive him to despair and blasphemy while Dismas seeks to turn his suffering to be united with Christ. Sheen: “Suffering does not necessarily make men better; it can sear and burn the soul, unless men are purified by seeing its redemptive value.”
- Navarre Bible, St Luke: Episode of two thieves invites us to admire the designs of divine providence, of grace and human freedom. Both thieves in same position, in presence of eternal high priest who is offering himself for forgiveness of sins. One hardens his heart and blasphemes, the other repents, prays for salvation and promised paradise.
- St Ambrose “The Lord always grants more than one asks: the thief only asked him to remember him, but the Lord says to him “truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” Life consists in dwelling with Jesus Christ and where Jesus Christ is there is his kingdom” (expositio evangelii sec. Lucam, in loc.)
- “In this life, we all sin, but we can all repent also. God is always waiting for us with arms wide open, ready to forgive us. Therefore, no one should despair: everyone should try to have a strong hope in God’s mercy, But no one may presume that he will be saved, for none of us can be absolutely certain

of our final perseverance” (Trent, de justificatione, canon 16).

- In response to Good Thief, Jesus shows he is God, for he has power over man’s final destiny, and shows he is infinitely merciful and does not reject the soul who sincerely repents. “We believe in eternal life. We believe that the souls of all those who die in the grace of Christ- whether they must still make expiation in the fire of purgatory, or whether from the moment they leave their bodies they are received by Jesus Christ into paradise like the Good Thief- go to form the People of God which succeeds death, death which will be totally destroyed on the day of the Resurrection when these souls are reunited with their bodies” (Bl Paul VI, Credo Populi Dei, 28).

3) **Does He repent?** Full Contrite vs partial, the graciousness of Christ. REMEMBER ME of Joseph in prison, is forgotten by servant he helped, But Jesus does not forget Dysmas.

- Does the Thief express true metanoia (repentance) for his sin? If yes, then is akin to the Prodigal Son and truly contrite. If not, then a greater forgiveness is required, while still a sinner Christ dies for him! The gratitude of God is out of proportion to the crime committed, he should be condemned for what he done yet he obtains paradise! An incomplete contrition can be forgiven!!!
- If his was true and full contrition, a testimony to the power of sins being totally forgiven through perfect contrition. A great source of hope for those who are unable to receive sacramental confession and absolution for some legitimate reason, that perfect contrition can grant pardon of sins when someone desires confession but is unable to receive the sacrament.
- Neuhaus: “Jesus does not reject any who turn to him. At times we turn to him with little faith, at times with a mix of

faith and doubt when we are more sure of the doubt than of the faith. Jesus is not fastidious about the quality of faith. He takes what he can get, so to speak, and gives immeasurably more than he receives. He takes our faith more seriously than we do and makes of it more than we ever could. His response to our faith is greater than our faith...Dysmas has faith smaller than a mustard seed, and it blossoms into a tree of eternal life, a tree of paradise. Christ's response to our faith is ever so much greater than our faith. Give him an opening, almost any opening, and he opens life to wonder beyond measure."

4) **Your Kingdom:** Expecting an earthly kingdom, what king does he see on the Cross, what king is Christ to us???

- IS he asking to be admitted to heavenly kingdom or expect Jesus' death to begin a kingly rule? Hard to say, as a revolutionary would make sense he would desire the earthly rule of the messiah and end of oppression of Rome, but now he speaks of hope placed in Christ as a king, a crucified king, one who refused the invitation to come down from his Cross to be hailed as Messiah and watch every knee bend to His Holy Name.
- We are beginning to see the willingness of the thief to now be a disciple and follower of Jesus, meaning now he would endure the Cross and await his place in the Kingdom.
- Benedict XVI "Of the two men crucified with Jesus, only one joins in the mockery: the other grasps the mystery of Jesus. He knows that he sees that the nature of Jesus' "offense" was quite different- that Jesus was nonviolent. And now he sees that this man crucified beside him truly makes the face of God visible, he is truly God's son....while on the cross, he realized that this powerless man was the true king-the one

- for whom Israel was waiting. Now he wanted to be at this man's side not only on the Cross, but also in glory.”
- Goodier: Others had asked that they might sit, the one on his right hand, the other on his left, in that kingdom; the penitent criminal had no such ambitions. He was standing on His right hand now, that was honour enough.”
 - St. Jerome: To enter “into your kingdom” shows Jesus’ kingly rule is begun by his death and resurrection. The thief has deep faith that the dying of Jesus is truly a kingly death and can dispense pardon and mercy that only a king can offer. Jesus, who will experience God’s victory over death, declares the repentant thief free from sin. Acts 10:42- “it is an acquittal uttered by him who is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead.”

5) **Amen I say to you:** a finality here. The Amen is a sign of future blessing for the thief, here Jesus is offering divine graciousness beyond any expectation.

- Goodier: the promise of a king: “He who was sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel had not failed the sinner who looked up to Him, had gone after one and had found it.” “It was language worthy of a conqueror, spoken on a field where a battle had been won; it was a reward worthy of Jesus Christ, the King of Israel, the Son of God. From a criminal, in an instant, to a saint the first of the New Dispensation; with this unique distinction granted to no other, that he was canonized before his death.”
- How much do we long for this final AMEN for Christ, to hear him say to us we are ready to enter paradise?

6) **Today:** Does he go straight to heaven, to Sheol, etc?? Jewish Annotated New Testament: Remember me (Ps 74:2, 18, 22). Paradise here is seen as home of the righteous dead prior to

the Resurrection. Explain afterlife in OT- Sheol, Gehenna, heaven is barred to all prior to death and resurrection of Jesus.

- THE TODAY- does not necessarily mean the day of crucifixion but could refer to a period of salvation inaugurated by the death of Jesus. Some saints taught that he goes to Sheol for a lack of full repentance and can't be in heaven until Christ has risen from the dead. He would accompany his king and rejoice to be with him as he saw his saviour harrow hell and bring his people to heaven.
- But can also be seen as this very day, Jesus offered him not only deliverance and pardon but also the chance to be WITH Jesus, to have divine Intimacy with Him. He will not only be with him in heaven but also with him in his victory, he will reign with the crucified king in his cross!
- Today can then be seen as the Thief going into heaven that very day, that he goes ahead of those in Sheol to know the fullness of Christ's kingdom, not by his merits but the sheer graciousness of Christ, who out of love for his ancestors will descend into Sheol to bring those who await him to paradise, where the Good Thief already reigns.
- Benedict XVI: "Instead of an unspecific future, he speaks of that very day "Today you will be with me in paradise." This too is a mysterious saying, but it shows us one thing for certain: Jesus knew he would enter directly into fellowship with the Father- that the promise of "paradise" was something he could offer "today". He knew he was leading mankind back to the Paradise from which it had fallen: into fellowship with God as man's true salvation."
- What does it mean to be in the Today with Jesus?

7) **You will be with me:** Paradise is being with Christ, here and in life to come. He begins to know paradise the moment he is finally with Christ, having made his confession, sought

forgiveness and knowing that after the agony of the crucifixion would come eternal beatitude.

- Goodier, the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ. “the man had seen and had felt compassion for the dying sufferer beside him; he had felt compassion and had defended him. At once he received his reward; there came to him the sight of his own guilt, and the grace of contrition came with it. And with contrition his eyes were opened” Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God.” ...
- Neuhaus: “There is something poignant, even pathetic, in his story. In Jesus the Christ, God has become man, as true man he lives a life of unqualified responsiveness to the Father, on the cross he does what has never been done before- he makes a perfect offering of love without blemish. And what does he have to show for it? The plan was for the salvation of the world, but after all this he returns to his heavenly home with the pathetic prize of one repentant thief...Jesus began at the bottom of the human heap. We should not be surprised by this, for he had so often said that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He began at the bottom to show that none can fall so far that they are beyond the reach of God’s love.”

8) **Paradise:** Return to Eden, given so much more than he asks for. 1 & 2 Corinthians: Paradeisos: Persian word for garden, used 3 times in NT. Goes back to Gen 2:8. Eden was a place of blessing and peace. Centuries after Fall, prophets speak of blissful conditions of Eden one day reappearing (Is 51:3, Ezk 36:35).

- The true garden of paradise is supernatural and heavenly, not natural and earthly. It is the dwelling place of God, this is where Jesus promises to take the Good Thief. Paradise: a return to original creation to eat from tree of life and fellowship with God in righteousness.

- The gates of paradise have been reopened by the obedience and faith of the New Adam...note how creation and temple respond to the entrance of Christ into the new Eden-creation is uprooted, temple, a blue print of Eden, is broken.
- Neuhaus:” It did not look like paradise. On that Friday afternoon two thousand years ago, out on the killing fields by the Jerusalem city dump, it did not look like paradise. And nobody in their right mind would confuse that city or any city in the world in which we live with paradise...Christians are those who, like the thief on the cross, have turned to Him with faith that is more like a desperate hope and, in listening to his response, have found the faith that moves mountains.”
- Neuhaus: “There is no returning to that paradise that was. The way to the tree of life is blocked. Lost is that innocence so bright with love. Now we need faith, for the truth is not transparent, now we need hope, for we know we are not what we are meant to be. The way to paradise is not the way of return, it was the way restored. It is restored by the one who said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’ A new Adam, Jesus Christ. A new eve, Mary the mother of the faithful. A new tree of life, the tree of the cross. All is restored “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

9) **HOPE!!!!** Benedict XVI: A sign of hope- the good thief has become an image of hope- an image of the consoling certainty that God’s mercy can reach us even in our final moments, that even after a misspent life, the plea for his gracious favor is not made in vain. From Dies Irae: qui latronem exaudisti, mihi quoque spem dedisti (just as you answered the prayer of the thief, so you have given me hope).”

Conversion story of Oscar Wilde, the great 19th century Victorian poet and playwright. ...

* Oscar Wilde had a life long interest in the Catholic Church but never had the strength to be baptized. He was enamored by the beauty of the Catholic Faith, intrigued by the solemnity of the liturgy and beauty of liturgical vestments. He longed to be with Christ but was unwilling and unable to let go of his sins: He was an alcoholic, saw the demise of his family, had homosexuals lovers, some of whom were young teens, and gave himself over to a life of excess and depravity.

* As his health declined, he watched as friends and lovers abandoned him and he plunged into poverty. As he lie dying on his deathbed, abandoned by all, he was finally able to accept salvation in Jesus Christ, asking to be baptized at the 11th hour. He spent but a few hours as a disciple of Jesus, rejoicing in the gift of salvation and freedom from his sin before he passed from this world to the next.

* Like the Good Thief he stole heaven, being able to turn to the crucified king as he was united to his passion and given the chance to enter paradise.

We cannot give up on the hope of others having this grace of final conversion and perseverance, to be able to steal heaven like the Good Thief even after a life of unrepentant sin.

* Final quote from Sheen “A dying man asked a dying man for eternal life; a man without possessions asked a poor man for a Kingdom; a thief at the door of death asked to die like a thief and stole paradise....in the Divine Plan it was a thief who was the escort of the King of kings into Paradise.” “It was the thief’s last prayer, perhaps even his first. He knocked once, sought once, asked once, dared everything and found everything.”