

Gospel Meditation: *John 4:1-26*

Individually or as a group, watch the Lenten devotional video and work through the following meditation.

²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." (Jn. 4:23-24)

REFLECT—*Sink into this passage for the next seven days using the following prompts:*

- Find a comfortable place and empty your mind of its many thoughts.
- Imagine Jesus speaking the words of verses 23-24 directly to you.
 - What does he sound like?
 - What's the tone of his voice?
 - What does it mean for your worship to be in both "Spirit and in truth"?

REPENT—*Take next steps to change your mind and behavior through the following prompts:*

- Imagine that you are the woman at the well.
 - Let the places of deep shame, hurt and woundedness come to mind.
 - Be conscious of what you're feeling in this moment.
 - How have you tried to deal with these insecurities in the past?
- Look into the eyes of Jesus as you stand next to the well.
 - Describe his facial expression.
 - What is he asking from you?
 - How does the light of his presence pierce the darkness of your pain?

PRAY—*Be embraced by the friendship of the crucified God.*

My crucified Jesus,
wash me with your most precious blood.
Look upon me as the good thief,
who hung on the cross next to you at Calvary.
A sinner, paying for their crimes,
but recognizes your divinity
and begs for mercy and forgiveness
and asks: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
Dear Lord, look upon me like the good thief.
And I should be so lucky, full of peace. Amen. (*Adapted from the Prayer of St. Dismas*)

"The early church fathers relate that when the thief of the Gospel came to the gates of the Kingdom, the Archangel with the flaming sword wanted to chase him away, but he showed him the cross. Immediately, the fire-bearing Archangel himself withdrew and permitted the thief to enter. Understand here not the wooden cross. But which? The cross in which the Apostle Paul boasts and concerning which he writes, 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus' (Gal. 6:17)."

—St. Anatoly of Optina (1855-1922), *Collection of Letters to Nuns*, c. 1910

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

One of my favorite songs is what you're listening to right now, "Jesus, Remember Me," sung by the Taizé community. The Taizé community is an ecumenical, monastic community based in the Taizé region of France. Their style of worship, marked by candles, contemplative reflection, many languages, and singing of scripture invites listeners to deeper and deeper reflection on the words and phrases of the song being sung or the scripture being recited. "Jesus, Remember Me" invites us to reflect on the words of one known as the "good thief" hanging on the cross next to Jesus. Though we don't know much about this man that we call the "good thief," the Taizé community invites us to reflect on the deep and profound longing in his request. "Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom." Quite jarringly, he refers to Jesus in a very familiar manner. The disciples, on the other hand, almost always call him "Teacher," "Master," or "Rabbi." Usually only the demons and those seeking healing use the name "Jesus," which in Hebrew means "the Lord saves." The thief calls him Jesus.

Following this very personal exchange from the thief to Jesus, we encounter the only time that Christ uses the word "paradise" in all of the Gospels. It's not to the religious elite who have followed enough of the Law to warrant their way into the kingdom. It isn't even to his trusty disciples who often play a cosmic game of missing the point. Instead, Jesus uses this word in his response to the good thief. The good thief is showing us who the one next to him really is. A man, yes. But also, God.

This thief, also known as the penitent thief, grateful thief or simply the thief on the cross, is one of two unnamed thieves in Luke's account of the crucifixion of Jesus. Luke describes him asking Jesus to "remember him" when Christ comes into his kingdom. The other thief, known as the bad or impenitent thief, challenges Jesus to save himself to prove that he is the Messiah. Just like the testing of Jesus in the wilderness, there is this tension between the cross and the crown. The way of world power is always self-preservation—the achievement of our crowns. The way of God's kingdom is the way of self-denial—the journey of the cross.

The good thief is traditionally known as Saint Dismas. The name "Dismas" was adapted from a Greek word meaning "sunset" or "death." A pious legend has it that the good thief was on the right, much as Matthew 25 depicts the final judgment of humanity with the goats on the left and the sheep on the right. The good thief is a found sheep. More accurately, he is a goat who was made an honorary sheep just before his time ran out. For this reason, depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus often show Jesus' head inclined to his right, showing his acceptance of the good thief.

According to the church father, John Chrysostom, this thief dwelt in the desert and robbed or murdered anyone unlucky enough to cross his path. Along these same lines, according to Pope Gregory I, the thief "was guilty of blood, even his brother's blood."

Yet in this intimate moment we find the sacred and the profane mixed together through the pain of the crucifixion. The Gospels draws us in closer in a posture of sacred eavesdropping. And rather than judgment, we find immense love and compassion. The theologian, Rowan Williams, notes that the thief's request reveals that "God is in the connections we cannot make."

If we're honest, we can quickly identify with the thief's request. Our lives are lived in anxiety about whether we will be remembered. We ask to be remembered because we are afraid we will be forgotten. Like the thief, we cry out. "Please, dear Jesus, remember us. Insure that our lives will have significance."

Jesus's crucified companion, however, does not ask to be remembered so that his life will have significance. Rather he asks, as the Psalms have taught Israel to ask, to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Such a request makes sense only if Jesus—a man undergoing the same crucifixion the thief suffers—can fulfill such a request. We desperately ask to be remembered, fearing we are nothing. In contrast this thief confidently asks to be remembered because he recognizes the One who can remember. This thief is able to see and acknowledge that this is indeed the One to redeem Israel. A thief bears witness to the son of God!

To be "remembered" is just that...we are re-membered, literally put back together piece by piece, through our new body given by the crucified Lord. Only Christ, only the second person of the Trinity, could make the promise that we will be truly remembered. To be with Jesus, to be claimed as his friend, is the paradise. Friendship with God is the true kingdom of God. As the theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, declares, "Like the thief we can live with the hope and confidence that the only remembering that matters is to be remembered by Jesus."

In agreement, the Catholic theologian, Richard John Neuhaus writes, "When our faith is weak, when we are assailed by contradictions and doubts, we are tempted to look at our faith, to worry about our faith, to try to work up more faith. At such times, however, we must not look to our faith but, like the good thief, look to [Jesus]. Look to him, listen to him, and faith will take care of itself. Keep looking. Keep listening."

We are friends of God because Jesus has chosen us...not because we originally chose him. As Corrie Ten Boom wrote in her memoir, *The Hiding Place*, "There is no pit so deep that his love is not deeper still." We are friends because God's plan is not to rescue a religious elite from an otherwise botched creation but to restore all things in Christ.

Assurance for us, and for the thief, means conviction, confidence and trust. It is not cognitive certitude. If we had such certainty, we would not be instructed to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, nor would we need to have faith. Faith as hope is confidence in God's faithfulness. We do not presumptuously stride up to the judgment throne confident of being handed the Good Servant Award. Rather, we throw ourselves upon the mercy of God and plead his promises in Christ. In his moment of intense pain, our saving Lord looked with compassion upon a thief and invited him into the divine friendship of paradise.

At the conclusion of Michael Card's song, "Why," a song of reflection on the crucifixion, two friends dialogue back and forth about the brutality of the cross. The lyrical conversation asks chilling questions that beg of us to pause and remember. It concludes with these words:

Why did it have to be a heavy cross he was made to bear?
And why did they nail His feet and hands; His love would have held him there
It was a cross for on a cross, a thief was supposed to pay
And Jesus had come into the world to steal every heart away

Yes, Jesus has come into the world to steal every heart away. Look at him and hear his promise of paradise. But remember that his paradise is his eternal friendship with you and with the world. One day, we pray, we will fully be with Jesus in paradise. We have Jesus's word on it. We have Easter as proof. And we know that God would never destroy the loving relationships God has with us. And one day, like the Good Thief, we will see that it is all true. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.