

The Last Seven Words of Christ:

2. "Truly I say to you today you shall be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23: 43)

Jesus' statement comes after an interchange between two thieves who are being crucified along with Jesus. One thief mocks Jesus, while the other defends him: "We are *paying* for what *we* did, but *this man* has done *nothing wrong*." And then this other thief says: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus reassures him: "Truly I say to you today you shall be with me in Paradise."

In this "second word" of Christ, recorded in Luke as it was originally written in Greek, there is no comma to guide its interpretation. In fact, the Greek language of the New Testament uses no commas. But when we hear this reassurance in English we need to hear a comma somewhere. We can read it either as: "Truly I say to you today, you shall be with me in paradise," or as: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise." It turns out that this lack of a comma has created huge theological controversies!

This debate over the placement of a comma reminds me of another grammatical puzzle over the presence of a comma. Consider the difference between these two statements. How many of you here tonight would like to hear someone shout: "Let's eat, Gramma!"? Me, too—it sounds like Easter dinner. But how many of you would like to hear someone shout: "Let's eat Gramma!" Me, neither! Who knew the *lack* of a comma could cause so much trouble? You see, your teachers always told you that punctuation matters!

The lack of a comma in Luke's account of Jesus' second word leaves open two interpretations: The first reading, "Truly I say to you today, you shall be with me in paradise," seems odd because it is unnecessary to say "Truly I say to you *today*". After all, when *else* would he be saying it? So all translations that I have found opt for the *second* reading, that "today you shall be with me in paradise." Yet there is an oddity in that, too, since it is generally thought that Jesus did not rise until "the *third* day," and did not ascend into heaven until 40 days *after* Easter. So, how could that happen *today*?

But that brings us to *another* oddity in this second word of Christ. Jesus promises to be with him in "*paradise*" today. He doesn't say "heaven," or any of the other terms commonly associated with an after-life, such as "eternal life" or "glory" or even "kingdom," which is what the thief had asked about. In fact, this is the only recorded place that Jesus uses the word "paradise." So, apparently he is not talking about heaven anyway.

The term Jesus uses is in fact connected with that *other* paradise we know about—the Garden of Eden. When we think of the Garden of Eden, what do we picture? It was a place where Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God and with one another—in which there was no conflict and no guilt...until the serpent came along and sowed dissention.

But I don't think we are supposed to imagine a literal and magical escape from Golgotha to Eden (as though Jesus had a transporter machine like you see on *Star Trek*). So, what would it mean for that thief on the cross to be *in paradise*—*with Jesus—that very day*? What I would emphasize in this word is Jesus' promise that he will be *with* the thief through this ordeal. The thief will indeed suffer the agony of

crucifixion, just as Jesus does. But the thief will not be *alone* in his suffering—Jesus will share that with him.

Now, you might wonder then, how the situation of this thief differs from the *other* thief. It's not as though the other thief will have his cross moved farther away from Jesus, so that he literally suffers alone. The difference is a matter of redemption. The other thief seems to savor his anger. He mocks Jesus just as the soldiers and crowd did, but that gains him no company or sympathy from those others. So he hangs there, alienated from God and humankind—suffering and dying *truly* alone.

Our confessing thief, on the other hand, has acknowledged his own guilt, and has honored the innocent sacrifice of Jesus. This acknowledgment truly saves him. He is not alienated but redeemed. And in this way, with Jesus by his side, he is unconflicted and guiltless, as Adam and Eve originally were in the Garden. He is of one mind and spirit in union with Jesus. In this sense, Jesus is with him even that very moment, in a state of paradise.

Brothers and sisters, we too can be with Jesus in paradise this very day. No matter our sufferings and our woes, they are known to God—indeed, already suffered by him, blamelessly and willingly. In his son Jesus Christ he takes up a position by us, with us, and promises to be with us through it all—with us in paradise, this very day and any day.

But is that all? Isn't there some eternal *escape* from suffering—some greater *reward*? On Good Friday, at the foot of the cross, we don't know. We only know that in our pain, Jesus is with us when we call on him. And that is enough for now.

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