

***The Gospel of Luke,
a Theological Application to our Lives***

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Luke 23:33-43[47]. Crucified with Christ the King

³³ When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified Him and the criminals there, one on the right and the other on the left. ³⁴ But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. ³⁵ The people stood by and watched; the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God.” ³⁶ Even the soldiers jeered at him. As they approached to offer him wine ³⁷ they called out, “*If you are King of the Jews, save yourself.*” ³⁸ Above him there was an inscription that read, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.” ⁴⁰ The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, “Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? ⁴¹ And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ He replied to him, “Amen, I say to you, today [*sêmeron*] you will be with me in Paradise.”

⁴⁴ It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon ⁴⁵ because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. ⁴⁶ Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”; and when he had said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, “This man was innocent beyond doubt.” (NAB)

Observations

- **Vv. 33[.43].46**, the first and last words that Jesus addresses to the Father: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”; [“I assure you: today you will be with me in paradise”]; [“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. Jesus requests forgiveness for those who crucify him and places his own life, burdened with all our sins, in the hands of his Father.
- **Vv. 33.39-43**, the two criminals crucified with Jesus, “one on the right and one on the left”. Luke contrasts two responses to the salvation that Jesus offers; the evangelist is a friend of contrasts:
 - o the beatitudes and curses;
 - o Simon the Pharisee and the sinner at the feet of Jesus;
 - o Mary, at the feet –the posture of the student, an apprentice– and Martha, occupied in *diakonía*;
 - o the rich man at table and poor Lazarus at the door;

- the Pharisee and the publican in the temple; the two criminals crucified with Jesus.

A hermeneutical key for the Gospel of Luke is the complex human being, suspended between two poles.

- V. 34, “Father, forgive them” (Acts 7:60), recalls the fourth request of the Our Father (cf. Lk 11:4), as well as the death of the first martyr
- V. 34, “They divided their clothes, casting lots” (Ps 22:19). Adam, after sin, fleeing from the presence of God, lost his glory; he discovered that he was naked and exposed. Adam and Eve now may win the clothing, the identity, of our Lord. Jesus, Lord, naked like sinful humanity (cf. Gen 3), clothed sinners with the garments of his son. (This connects with the return of the prodigal son, cf. 15:22, the best tunic for the son, returned home). The Gerasene demoniac naked (8,27) among tombs, now clothed and sitting at Jesus’ feet (8,25).
- Vv. 35-39, Jesus crucified, mocked by the authorities, by the soldiers and by a co-crucified; the taunts – “If you are the Messiah of God..., *save yourself*” (vv. 35. 37. 39)– echo the temptations of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, “If you are the Son of God” (cf. 4:3.9). The temptation to save oneself represents the supreme aspiration of a person who, moved by the fear of death, tries to save himself at all costs.
- V. 41, Jesus’ defense lawyer is a criminal
- **V. 42**, “Remember me...” recalls the prisoner’s address to Joseph (Gen 40:13-14), an invocation heard in the psalms and other biblical texts. The individual fears being forgotten. In reality, God doesn’t abandon us, we abandon God. “Does a woman forget her child at her breast, without pitying the son of her womb? Well, even if they forget, I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15).
- **V. 43**, “*Today [σήμερον] you will be with me in paradise*”; the word σήμερον and its cognate ἡμέρα, is a typical word in Luke to indicate the daily life, the “ordinariness” of salvation; see 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32.33; 19:5.9; 22:34.61; 23:43. He recalls the condition of discipleship (9:23), “Whoever wants to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross every day [καθ’ ἡμέραν] and follow me”; Luke is the gospel for the everyday Christian.
- **V. 43**, “you will be with me”. In Ps 23:4 the psalmist trusts: “Although I walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, because you are with me”. Jesus, the good shepherd, guides his sheep along the paths of life.

- **V. 44**, the darkness at noon is the figure the prophets used to announce God's judgment (Joel 2:10; 4:15; Amos 8:9).
- **V. 45**, "the veil of the temple was torn", after 3 hours of darkness. Here we hear the testimony that, in the dark night, a new light comes to us, free access to God. All humanity has access to the Father (Heb 10:19-22), indicated by the fact that the Temple curtain is torn in half, a curtain that separated the place of God's presence (Lev 16:2)
- **V. 46**, Jesus prays the psalm (31:6) of trust in God, who welcomes us with love; this recalls the prayer in Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup of bitterness away from me; but not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42); Lucas records that an angel attended him and comforted him.
- **V. 47**, the verdict of innocence was announced by a gentile executioner

Today [σήμερον], a particular interest in the gospel and in the community to with it is addressed.

- 23:43, Jesus addresses the repentant thief: "σήμερον you will be with me in paradise"
- 2:11, to the shepherds, at night: "Today, in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord has been born to you"
- [in some mss. at the baptism of Jesus, a voice from heaven:] 3:22, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased", it reads, citing Ps 2:7, "You are my Son, I love you, I have begotten you today"
- 4:21, Jesus addresses his fellow citizens in the synagogue of Nazareth: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"; with this announcement, Jesus begins the jubilee year (of salvation): the visit Isaiah promised: the Good News to the poor, freedom to prisoners, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.
- 5:26 (after the spiritual/moral and physical healing of the paralytic, the audience acclaims:) "Today we have seen wonderful things"
- 9:23 (condition of discipleship): "Whoever wants to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross every day [καθ' ἡμέραν] and follow me"
- 11:3 (Our Father:) "Give us each day [ἐπιούσιος] our daily bread [καθ' ἡμέραν]"
- 12:27-28, Jesus speaks of the trust in to divine Providence: "Look at the lilies, how they neither spin nor weave. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory dressed like one of them. Well, if the grass that is in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, God dresses it in this way, how much more to you, men of little faith!"
- 13:32-33,

- 19:5, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, because it I must stay at your house today”
- and then, 19:9 [to Zacchaeus], “Today salvation has come to this house.”
- 22:34.61, at the last supper, anticipating the desertion of his disciples: “I tell you: Peter, before the rooster crows today you will have denied three times that you know me”
- 23:43 (Jesus to the criminal:) “Today you will be with me in paradise”

Key moments in Jesus’ ministry are scheduled with this σήμερον, “today”. In Psalm 95:7 we hear: “Today if you listen to his voice, do not harden your heart as in Meribah”. God, who spoke to the Israelites in the past, addresses us “today” in the liturgy, and warns us against hardening our hearts, and invites us to listen and be transformed by the Word of God. We participate in the saving and liberating works of Jesus, who addresses us today, touches our blind eyes and afflicted bodies. With the theology of “today”, Luke bridges the events of Jesus’ ministry to our lives.

Some indications of “today” are related to the sacraments: 1) Today we are born again; 2) today we are anointed by the Holy Spirit; 3) today our sins are forgiven; 4) today our illnesses are cured; 5) today Jesus joins us in a meal; 6) today we will join him in paradise.

Reflection

We contemplate the enthronement of Christ the King. Sprouting from the horizon between earth and sky, three wooden posts against a sky-blue field. Nailed to the post in the center, a naked figure. A criminal at his side is his last defender, ready now to accompany his Lord into his kingdom. This servant radiates hope, while he requests: “Lord, remember me when you arrive in your kingdom,” and hope is rewarded: “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

The portrait is splendid: King and servant, the two in dialogue, breathing their last. Both have received the death penalty, but one, the King, is innocent while the subject receives a reprieve by defending his Lord. Jesus, the innocent lamb sacrificed for our sin, pays the release of the criminal. Christ Crucified grants the reprieve to those condemned to die receive pardon and are freed. The dialogue recalls old Simeon's canticle: “At last, O Lord, according to your promise, you can release your servant for final peace” (Lk 2:29).

Nothing is said of the other crucified criminal, the one who mocks Jesus: “If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us”, the one who does not hear the reprieve: “Today you will be with me in paradise”, who finds no meaning or transcendent value in his suffering.

*I ask myself, what is the value, the supernatural value of my suffering?
Where is it going? What is its value? Do I treasure it like a private devotion,
or does it have liturgical value?*

Now, we move on to the present life: many crosses. The panorama is no less spectacular. Our King, the Lamb of God, the scapegoat, burdened with our guilt, looks like us... the only difference is, he is innocent. Now we identify with the one who became one with us. We behold our King, enthroned on the cross; let us approach him to achieve value and meaning in our own lives.

Name, describe the suffering you carry at this stage of your life – physical, emotional, spiritual, social. Reflect on the question, what is the transcendental value of this suffering? Where do you find a theological value in suffering?

There is no one present who does not carry the cross, no matter what it is made of or how much it weighs: distance, rejection or clashes with a loved one, vocation crisis, illness or physical pain, anxiety, care and concern for a family member, anxiety and fears that crucify the spirit day after day. In this scene Christ, our King, fully enters our life, he does not despise the cross; on the contrary, with it he opens the door to death and resurrection.

Friends of the gospel, our crosses are planted together with the cross of Christ, on the left or on the right. Some on the left side tempt and ridicule Jesus to come down, or they forget Jesus, so preoccupied are they by their own concerns. The one on the left is the voice of the society we live in, a generation with little patience for discomfort, inconvenience, for humility and suffering.

From the cross on the right side we hear: “Remember me, Lord, when you come into your Kingdom.” It is the wisdom of God that Saint Benedict teaches when he encourages us to persevere in our commitments until death, to share “in the sufferings of Christ with patience, so that we may deserve to share in his kingdom” (RB prol.50). At the end of the Holy Rule, Saint Benedict gives an ecclesial value to all the areas of our life” (RB 72).

First, Saint Benedict recommends fraternal charity: “Let them anticipate honoring one another.” With these words he underlines a basic value in community life and in all forms of friendship and love: respect for one another. This attitude must be practiced: we become imitators of Christ, who came first to love us. Like Christ who first loved us and sacrificed himself for us, may we be first to love and respect our sister and brother.

The second advice complements the first and emphasizes the human misery that we all share: “Tolerate with the utmost patience the physical and moral weaknesses of the brothers” (RB 72.5). Patience, which has a lot to do with shared suffering, is a form of fidelity in love; in a real way we share the suffering of those around us. It is an approach not grounded on feelings; it is a choice nourished by faith and grace.

In the portrait of Christ the King enthroned, we are in his presence. The thorns on his head radiate like rays of light, crowning him King, but unique king. A dying criminal addresses him: “Lord, when you come to your Kingdom, remember me.” The criminal declares Jesus innocent: “This man has done no wrong”; he recognizes his true King and Lord: “When you arrive in your Kingdom, remember me.” Jesus takes the load of his baggage and welcomes him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Christ the King cancels our guilt and saves us.

Meditation

- *Contemplate the crucifixion of Christ the King. X-ray the attitudes that your conscience harbors towards the magnitude and mystery of Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of the world*
- *Identify the attitudes of the co-crucified with Jesus. Find in yourself the traits of the co-crucified, “one on the right and one on the left”.*
- *Identify the hope and the prayer of one of the two.*
- *Identify the cynicism, ridicule, and disbelief of the other.*

Jesus *orante*, model of prayer

Luke describes Jesus as the model of prayer, the *orante*. At important moments Jesus prays, he retires in solitude to commune with his Father. When he describes Jesus praying, Luke has his community in mind. For Luke, prayer is the dotted line that traces our walk through life. Through the same door of prayer through which Jesus enters his passion and death to the resurrection, the believer

enters the resurrection. Prayer identifies us with Jesus, and opens us to life in his Holy Spirit.

What happens at prayer? At baptism, Jesus prays, and the sky opens (3:21) – a sublime picture of the effect of prayer, that opens the skylight to heaven, and the Holy Spirit descends. In prayer we realize that we are loved by God, we recognize our true and lasting identity.

When Jesus cured the lepers and the people gathered around him, he retired to a solitary place to pray (5:16). Prayer is a refuge where we are free from the noise and from passing illusions. Before Jesus selected the twelve apostles, he spent the night in prayer (6:12). Prayer enables us to make decisions. Before asking his disciples about what the people thought about him, before Peter's confession, Jesus prayed (9:18). In prayer he prepares to introduce his disciples to the mystery of his suffering and his path to the cross and resurrection.

Only Luke reports that Jesus prayed during the transfiguration: “While he prayed, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (9:29). With prayer we get in touch with who we are and who we are meant to be. The superfluous is removed. The illusions and idolatries that motivate us fall away, and in the transfiguration the truth of our beauty shines forth. Our face radiates the splendor of God who dwells in us; we recognize that we are a reflection of God.

Moses and Elijah accompanied transfigured Jesus in prayer. Moses is the middleman who delivered the law. When we pray, our life is put in order, we experience freedom in God and the impression that people have of us no longer matters. Elijah is the prophet. In prayer the prophetic quality of our life dawns on us. In prayer –the transfiguration of Jesus teaches– we come into contact with our true selves and the glory of God shines through us. What happens in prayer can't be turned on and off like a faucet. A cloud envelopes us and darkens our gaze, but that experience of light accompanies us as we return alone to the valley of darkness, the shadowlands of daily life.

The high point of Jesus' prayer is the Passion. On the Mount of Olives, he is confronted with the will of God. An angel – only in Luke's account – visits Jesus,

sweating blood, and strengthens him. Praying is just peaceful, since even in prayer the *orante* wrestles with the will of God. But an angel visits and revives our strength, in the face of anxiety and fear. Jesus sweats blood before his passion, and he prays with greater insistence (22:44).

Luke narrates the scene on the Mount of Olives against the background of darkness. We are not strangers to the darkness and God's silence. We sometimes think that our prayer is empty, that it is not profitable, that nothing happens, there's nobody on the other side, or God, silent, has cancelled us in his FACE. "The system is down". What happened to the disciples happens to us: we fall asleep in prayer. And then the wake-up call: "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so you can face the test" (22:46). We experience the same trials Jesus did: loneliness, anxiety, abandonment, need, and suffering. Prayer overcomes temptations and keeps God present in the extreme difficulties. Jesus counselled the sleeping disciples, "Pray that you may not be put to the test" (22:40).

The prayer in Gethsemane gave Jesus the strength to endure the Passion. Through prayer he receives the knowledge and the confidence that, even in death, God would not abandon him.

Jesus reaches the peak of his prayer on the cross, where he prays not just for himself, but for his murderers: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they do" (23:34); he dies praying as a pious Jew, reciting the vespers psalm with his last breath: "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). But he adds to his words an intimate note of confidence, *Abba*. From the cross Jesus affectionately addresses his Father into whose loving hands he confides his life. Prayer infuses meaning in this Passover. Amid all cruelty, Jesus prays and offers himself into God's hands. His relationship with God frees him from the power of human adversaries. His own assassins do not triumph over him. Prayer allows him to ascend to another level where the catcalls of his executioners have no effect. The prayer that Jesus exercises from the beginning of his ministry to his death on the cross, is where he finds his support. He persevered in his life's mission thanks to the strength of prayer; prayer kept the window to heaven open and kept in union with his Father.