

Week 8: “Jesus, remember me” (Mt. 23:42)

This week’s *Images of Christ* series takes up the theme of Jesus crucified with two thieves, one of whom asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. All four gospels mention Jesus crucified between two thieves. In Matthew and Mark’s gospels the thieves taunt Jesus to come down from the cross so that they might “see and believe.” John’s gospel simply states that Jesus was crucified with two others, one on either side. Only Luke’s gospel contains the conversation between Jesus and the thief who asked to be remembered by Jesus in his kingdom.

Biblical scholars have long recognized the seeming differences and contradictions between the gospel accounts. These differences, however, encourage us to understand what happened as Jesus was crucified with two others. Luke’s gospel describes a moment of insight in which one thief was transformed from taunting to believing. In Luke’s account, while the first thief continued to deride Jesus, saying “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*” The penitent thief rebuked the other, saying, “*Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong*” (Lk. 23:40-41).

The unnamed penitent thief then turned to Jesus, saying, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” Two thieves had been condemned to death, and one, realizing in the final moments of his life his own sinfulness, turned to Jesus. He recognized the justice of his own sentence, the injustice of Jesus’ sentence, and remarkably, Jesus’ kingship over him.

Jesus replied to him, “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” Jesus seems to contradict his own command about baptism and salvation (Mk 16:16), as even a thief and

condemned man found grace at the cross. Like Peter’s words, “*Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (Jn. 6:68), Jesus makes it clear that no one is ever outside of words of grace – no one is ever without hope.

This week’s first image of Christ is titled, “Christ Crucified with the Good Thief” attributed to Francesco Allegrini da Gubbio (1587-1663), an Italian Baroque painter whose works are in churches in Rome, Genoa, and Savona. The image shown here, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was rendered with pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash. It reveals the moment in Luke when the thief turns to Jesus saying, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” It is an image of the ultimate moment between one man and Jesus. It reveals that in suffering the same cross and death as



the thief, Jesus took upon himself a death and suffering that completely identifies with our humanity. The cross reminds us of Isaiah's words, *"because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors"* (Isa. 53:12). Jesus made intercession for a transgressor in his final moments, a sign of his intercession for the sin of many – for all of us.

The second image of Christ below was painted by Russian-Ukrainian painter Mykola (Nikolai) Ge (1831-1894) titled, "Christ and the Thief on the Cross" (1893). This painting, like many of Ge's later religious paintings was banned from exhibition for its graphically realistic and expressionist portrayal of Jesus. Ge's later religious works such as this foreshadow the symbolism and emotion of the Expressionist movement in the early twentieth century.

The image is charged with color and the composition broken by brushstrokes suggesting the physical and emotional brokenness of the crucifixion. Ge's painting captures the moment when Jesus replies, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Brushstrokes between Jesus and the thief tie them together as they now share the cross and its meaning in a new way. Ge has also painted, faintly in outline, a cross behind Jesus' head, which seems to shine on the forehead of the thief, marking him with the sign of the cross.



The penitent thief reminds us of Paul's words, *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me"* (Gal. 2:20). A thief who turned to Jesus offers us hope that even in our darkest moments, Jesus is next to us offering grace and new life.

Jesus did not give the all too familiar human answer, "Well, it's too late now; you should have thought about that sooner." Rather, Jesus responded with grace and love to a man crucified with him. In Jesus' own last moments his concern was only for another who asked for his help.

Martin Luther wrote of the cross as the place where God is hidden in suffering and revealed in love. The love of the cross is God's grace that makes sinful people righteous, giving new life and hope in the midst of humanity's brokenness and despair.

Words have power. The words of Jesus gave eternal life to a condemned man. The word translated as, *"Truly,"* is literally *"Amen"* ("so be it") in Greek; meaning *"So be it I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Jesus responds to each of us as we face our own limitations, those moments when we feel condemned in our own humanity. The cross is God's *"Amen"* to resurrection and new life.

In Holy Baptism we are marked with the cross of Christ forever. Living sacramentally in the covenant of baptism we grow in faith to God's gracious will for us. Remembering Paul's words, *"it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,"* we too pray, *"Jesus remember me."* The way of the cross leads daily to moments of resurrection and renewed life. May we always seek forgiveness, and in doing so, may we always speak words of forgiveness and hope to others. Words have power. Amen.