

THE SECOND WORD FROM THE CROSS

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 Grace Church, New York
 Good Friday, 22 April 2011

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Do you remember Ash Wednesday? “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

What are we to make of a season which begins with a stark reminder that we are little more than the dust that floats in the air? These words from Genesis, from God to Adam, “By the sweat of your brow, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” declare that that we are mortal and because we have sinned, we will walk through our days with the knowledge that our time here is limited. We live under a death sentence; but we do not like to be reminded of it.

Now, almost 50 days later, we hear words from Jesus recorded for us in the Gospel according to St. Luke, told to a criminal he met only moments earlier: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

These words are taken as a reason to have faith in God’s love for us. Only moments earlier, one of the thieves rebuked the other for deriding Jesus, saying, “Do you not fear God... We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds.” All the thief had to do was to declare his faith in Jesus and Paradise was his.

This is a very difficult day. We are here this afternoon remembering, essentially, the death of the most important person in the history of the world and in our lives. And yet today we can sometimes easily forget just how horrible that day was for those around Jesus at the time, since we know how the story proceeds. Yet death is never something we take lightly. We all know that experience of being with someone who is sick as we wait for death and then, all of a sudden, ... the life is gone. Silence. This afternoon we are sitting here remembering the last hours of Jesus before his death. I suspect that many of you, like we do at memorials and funerals, find ourselves of many mixed emotions – all at the same time.

I once knew an 85 year old woman who was depressed on the one year anniversary of the death of her husband of 65 years.

She had wanted to spend the day thinking about her husband, honoring him with her memories of him when she suddenly realized that several hours had passed during the afternoon when she had forgotten him. How hard could it be to give him the respect that their marriage deserved, she said to me. She had gone for a walk in the park and run into a friend. They talked a bit, walked a bit, and stopped at a café on the way home for little while. She recalled even laughing at funny stories and jokes from her friend. Now she doesn’t remember how it happened but they got caught up talking about the funeral of her own mother many years earlier, when she suddenly, as she heard the tiny plop of a sugar cube fall into her tea cup, she remembered how her husband loved to make little buildings out of sugar cubes and she realized what day it was and that she had forgotten her husband after all.

When she got home, she was determined not to forget him again. She started to make a little supper, but as she was heating up some soup, she found herself thinking about her own death, wondering who would be there, what the weather would be like, and trying to decide what music she wanted played at the service when, again, she glanced at the wooden spoon she was using, as she pushed it against the rim of the pot, she recalled the day that she and her husband had purchased that spoon more than 65 years earlier and found herself smiling and then crying, thinking to herself, “who would ever have imagine a simple wooden spoon would have lasted so long?” Once again, she had forgotten her husband and this time, because her mind was wandering to thoughts about her own death.

Why couldn't she manage to stay focused? Guilt and depression followed. That's when she called and we talked.

Perhaps even now, some of us are thinking about Good Friday last year. Where were we for Good Friday when we were children? Which service did we like the best? Which sermon was the worst? Our minds naturally drift until we realize that we have completely forgotten why we are here. We have forgotten that we are sitting here recalling the death of Jesus, the execution of Jesus, in the presence of his mother and friends, in a situation that I suspect very, very few of us can actually, really imagine, and then, there we go again -- thinking about dinner tonight, something interesting we heard on the news this morning, and so it goes. Back and forth, recalling this death and the death of another last week or last year. Perhaps we catch ourselves thinking about our own deaths. Who will remember us? Where will the service be? Who will preside? What music will there be?

And as naturally as our hearts move from now to the past to the future, we are caught up short, in between the prayers and the hymns with these words Jesus spoke, out of the blue and so casually, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

The world is full of people for whom this is just an ordinary day, ordering pizza for lunch, heading out to the bars for a drink before the weekend, hitting the road early to get out of town to be home with family and friends. How hard could it be for the world to remember this most important event in history?

If you have not yet seen it, go see the film *Of Gods and Men*. I saw it a few weeks ago. It is about the experience of a group of Trappist monks in Algeria in 1996. These men had given their lives to prayer and devotion to God and service to the people in a small town. Algeria was in a civil war at the time; it was a dangerous time. These men were, well, so ordinary. They were not brave heroes like the saints. These men were portrayed as ordinary people with fears and hopes and dreams – just like us. As the story progressed the viewer learns a little about their families and friends: in some cases, what they were trying to escape and in some cases, what dreams of glory they hoped to achieve. Ordinary people with ordinary sins and ordinary faith -- basically good people whose minds and hearts and faith wander. Ordinary people who sometimes think about what we will have for dinner while midway through a Eucharistic service. Ordinary people who sometimes have uncharitable thoughts about the person sitting next to us in church, as ordinary, as ordinary as dust.

And Jesus tells a thief, “You will be with me in Paradise.”

You know, it is extraordinary what the message of Jesus is. It flies in the face of common sense. No one in the world would be surprised if Jesus, in his last breath, expressed love for his family and friends. That he had doubts or fear is not a shock to any of us. That he tried to be hopeful for the future is what we all would want to hear at the end of a story about a young, charismatic leader like Jesus. What is a surprise is that in an almost casual way, he asserted the power of God's love that everyone has access to it. We don't need to do anything for it. We don't need to be powerful or smart or talented or, for that matter, well-balanced, moderate, wise, or saintly. We ask for God's grace and find that it has already been given to us.

We are ordinary people, made of dust, but it is to dust that God promised paradise and declared in so casual a way as in the slight glance to a stranger moments before Jesus died, in a word or two that should have been forgotten, but it wasn't.

So what I would like to leave you with is one final thought and then a quotation from the end of the movie *Of Gods and Men*. Our minds and hearts and perhaps our faith this afternoon will naturally wander from prayer and reflection about the death of Jesus to fears and concerns about our own deaths to memories – both good and bad – about the deaths of others, Good Fridays throughout our lives. We set apart this day that commemorates the death of the most important person in history and yet, today seems so ordinary, so average, so much like all other days -- and that's not bad. The Gospel's strength comes from being delivered in an ordinary way to ordinary people. Yes, we are dust, but it is out of dust that God created everything – everything, and everyone!

This quotation is an edited extract from the end of the film *Of Gods and Men*. It closes with an anonymous letter from one of the monks, anticipating his own death and even addressing and praying for his expected killer, mimicking the sentiments and even the words of Jesus. I could hear Jesus' spirit in these words, almost as if this monk were a prophet expressing some of the inner, unrecorded thoughts of Jesus on this very afternoon, assuming that his death would be forgotten and his Gospel viewed as foolish, that those who killed him would be misunderstood, perhaps for two thousand years.

This Trappist monk wrote in the last letter before his death,..

“Should it ever befall me, and it could happen today, to be a victim of the terrorism swallowing up all foreigners here, I would like my community, my church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country.

The Unique Master of all life was no stranger to this brutal departure. And that my death is the same as so many other violent ones, consigned to the apathy of oblivion.

I've lived enough to know that I am complicit in the evil that, alas, prevails over the world and the evil that will smite me blindly. I could never desire such a death. I could never feel gladdened that these people I love be accused randomly of my murder. I know the contempt felt for the people here, indiscriminately.

My death, of course, will quickly vindicate those who called me naïve, or idealistic, but they must know that I will be freed of a burning curiosity and, God willing, will immerse my gaze in the Father's and contemplate with him his children as he sees them.

This gratitude which encompasses my entire life includes you, of course, friends of yesterday and today, and you too, friend of the last minute, who knew not what you were doing.

Yes, to you as well I address this gratitude and this farewell which you envisaged. May we meet again, happy thieves in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen.”