Jesus said: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise

Luke 23:32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 [Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35 And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37 and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38 There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

Luke 23:39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The account of Jesus’ death in all four Gospels is fundamentally the same and yet different according to the understanding being promoted by each writer. (The last words of Jesus in each Gospel would illustrate this variety.) In the third Gospel, the death of Jesus is portrayed as that of a prophet-martyr, consistent with the presentation of the figure of Jesus throughout the Gospel and the Acts. The story of the Good Thief is unique to Luke and offers a great insight into his theology of the cross. This is highly paradoxical kingship, of course.

God now rules through the vulnerability of Jesus. Vv. 32-34 are included for context.

KIND OF WRITING

Once more, this is a chreia, an anecdote designed to disclose some essential aspect of Jesus’ life and ministry. Being at the very centre of the story of Jesus, these verses carry special significance.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the Hebrew Bible, there isn’t very much about a future Messiah. However, Psalms 2 and 110 were taken to refer to God’s anointed (see Acts 2:29–36 and Luke 20:42-43).

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed (= literally messiah), saying, I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you. (Psalms 2:2, 7)

The LORD says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.” The LORD sends out

Thought for the day

In A. A. Milne, we read the following scrap of dialogue:

“What day is it?” It’s today,” squeaked Piglet. “My favourite day,” said Pooh.

Today has to be our favourite day because it is the only day we’ll ever have. As St Augustine alarmingly noticed, the past is over, the future is not yet and the present, fleeting moment is the future becoming the past. And yet, this flying time is our “today of salvation,” a day like no other, not to be repeated. See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (2 Corinthians 6:2) The pulse of life is the heartbeat of God.

Prayer

In this present moment, Lord, help us to put our fingers on the pulse of life, living fully life in abundance. Amen.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

“Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn to his descendants that the Messiah, an ancestor of David’s, would come after him, who would make David’s people secure again. He foretold the things of which our Lord Jesus spoke when he said, ‘I will raise to David one of his descendants to sit on my throne. He will build an eternal temple for my name.’

David was a man from humble origins, and when he became king, he proved himself to be a great king. His descendants will be like him. He was so humble; even now he is hailed as a prophet, for God is with him. This is what David prophesied himself, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” (Acts 2:29–36)
On the innocence of Jesus

Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. (Luke 23:15) Cf. Luke 23:47.

ST PAUL
For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:21–25)

BRIEF COMMENTARY


The invitation to save himself echoes both the temptation narrative (Luke 4:9–13) and the scene in Nazareth at the start of this Gospel (He said to them, “Doth less you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’” [Luke 4:23]). Finally, the mocking ironically underscores important dimensions for believers, that is God’s Messiah (Luke 2:11, 26; 3:15; 4:41; 9:20; 20:41; 22:67; 23:2, 35, 39; 24:26, 46; Acts 2:31, 36; 3:18, 20; 4:26; 5:42; 8:3; 9:22; 17:3; 18:3; 26:23), his chosen one (9:35 at the Transfiguration).

Verse 36 Sour wine in Matthew and Mark is linked to Elijah. However, in Luke’s theology, Elijah has already left the stage at the Transfiguration. Hence, the wine is reduced to being part of the mocking.

Verse 37 Again, ironically, the soldiers proclaim the true identity of Jesus. He is indeed the King of the Jews and he will save not himself but all of humankind.

Verse 38 In the same vein, the notice underlines Jesus’ kingship. The notice itself is primarily political. For the Romans to pay attention, it had been necessary to “convert” an essential religious charge into a political one. Always sensitive to unrest, the Romans took the bait. Cf. But he said to them, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.” (Luke 4:13)

Verse 39 This story expands a comment in Mark and Matthew that those crucified with him also derided him. The following scene and dialogue with the Good Thief are found only in Luke’s Gospel, profiling sin, exclusion and conversion.

Verse 40 Fear, in the Bible, usually means not fright but religious awe. The Good Thief implies that the mockers are not on the side of God and calls his companion to a true estimate. The Good Thief is the last in a line of disreputable characters in Luke’s Gospel who paradoxically proclaim the Good News. There’s hope for us all...

Verse 41 A moving and compelling theme in Luke’s telling of the crucifixion is the innocence of Jesus, which is attest ed by a wide range of figures: Herod Agrippa, Pilate, the women of Jerusalem, Jesus himself, the Good Thief and the centurion (his words are changed to “Certainly this man was innocent”). So, Luke will have us ask, why did this man die? The Good Thief does not at all protest his own innocence.

Verse 42-43 The gospels try to bring the death and resurrection close together. Matthew does this by means of opening the graves[1]. John achieves it by calling the death the “lifting up”, which includes resurrection. Luke’s approach is by means of a promise of paradise made before the death of Jesus himself. For this anticipation before death, compare: But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:55–57). As often noted, the “today” of salvation is part of Luke’s theology, even from the very start. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord!” (Luke 2:10–11). Compare: Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32–33; 19:5, 9; 22:34, 61; 23:43.

POINTERs FOR PRAYER
1. Today’s feast puts before us Jesus who never used power to his own advantage. Whom have you known who used power for the benefit of others rather than for their own self-interest? When have you used power in this way?

2. The power of God is shown in an unexpected way in the Crucifixion, not in a wonderful display of spectacular dominance, but in Jesus sharing our human weakness. When has the honesty of another sharing his/her human vulnerability with you had a powerful effect? When has your honesty in that way had a positive effect on another?

3. Jesus is an example of someone in apparent helplessness. It was his trust in the love of God with him that helped him through. It was only later with the hindsight of the resurrection that the moment of helplessness could be seen as one in which the power of God was present. Have you had experiences on which you can look back now and see that the power of God was at work in your moments of helplessness?

4. The scene also puts before us the liberating power of forgiveness. The forgiveness of Jesus brought new life to the criminal hanging on the cross with him. When have you found that forgiveness given, or received, was a source of new life for yourself or for others?

PRAYER
God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you gave us your Son, the beloved one who was rejected, the Saviour who appeared defeated.

Yet the mystery of his kingship illumines our lives. Show us in his death the victory that crowns the ages, and in his broken body the love that unites heaven and earth.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen
God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son

Col 1:9 For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthy of the Lord and please him in all respects—bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light. 13 He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, 16 for all things in heaven and on earth were created by him—all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers—all things were created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him. 18 He is the head of the body, the church, as well as the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, so that he himself may become first in all things. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son and through him to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross—through him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading—rich and challenging—is very suitable for the feast. Like the Gospel, it bring together kingdom and cross. Although the letter is most likely from second generation Paulinism rather than from the apostle himself, it is still within the Pauline tradition and reflects his teaching.

KIND OF WRITING

Our text is a hymn, a kind of poetry, but with a particular background, reflecting both the book of Genesis and early Christian speculation on the Second Adam. Within the New Testament, the Second Adam imagery is taken from Genesis (cf. 1 Cor 15 and Rom 5). The big difference here is the pre-existence of the Second Adam.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The church was founded by one of Paul’s associates, a certain Epaphras (1:7–8; 4:12). References to other Christian leaders in 4:7–17 (such as Typhicus, Onesimus, Mark, Barnabas, Luke, and Nympha) offer a lively picture of the importance of personal contacts and friendships in the Pauline churches.

Colossians repudiates vigorously a false religious position which may tempt the addressees (2:8–23). Its advocates called it a “philosophy” and emphasised “the elemental spirits of the universe,” visions and worship of (or alongside) angels, the observance of special festivals (including sabbaths), and certain ritual and ascetic regulations (including circumcision and the avoidance of certain foods).

RELATED PASSAGES

For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthy of the Lord and please him in all respects—bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God. (Col 1:9–10)

My goal is that their hearts, having been knit together in love, may be encouraged, and that they may have all the riches that assurance brings in their understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col 2:2–3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 The words “Christ Jesus” have been supplied to make sense. Immediately, there is a double reference both Genesis 1:27 and the resurrection. In Apocalyptic imagination, the resurrection is inherently cosmic. As well as that, in Apocalyptic the beginning (pro-tology) and the end (eschatology) are, so to speak, congruent, in that they resemble each other. Cf. “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) …and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (Revelation 1:5) The imagery of the pre-creation existence of the Son is taken from the Old Testament Wisdom literature. See Proverbs 8, Wisdom 7 and Sirach 24.

Verse 16 The writer is opposing a teaching which denied that the fullness of redemption is to be found in Christ. Already, before the incarnation, everything was made in view of Christ. The “thrones or dominions or rulers or powers” are the spiritual forces hostile to God and prominent in the teachings of heretics (Col 2:15–21).

Verse 17 The pre-existence of Christ is linked to biblical and Jewish speculation about the pre-existence of Wisdom. The whole cosmos coheres in him and there is not “outside” or “more” that we need. The root meaning of cosmos is order and beauty (cf. cosmetics), thus sustaining in contrast with destructive chaos.

Verse 18 The first part may well be an insertion by the author into the hymn, to keep the experience grounded in the community. “Firstborn from among the dead” takes us from the beginning (protos) to the end (eschatos).

Verse 19 Fullness—pántōma—leaves no doubt that God’s full and complete revelation is through Jesus Christ.

Verse 20 The author takes us back to the centrality of the cross for Paul. The first reconciliation is between Jews and Gentiles. But there is also a cosmic victory over the powers and thus the peace of final victory is bestowed.

POINTERs FOR PRAYER

1. How has your own awareness of the centrality of Christ changed and grown over the years?

2. Christ the fullness, Christ the pantocrator, who hold us all: ground for hope and joy.

3. We are all in the image of God, but Christ is so in a special, revelatory sense. How has that become clear to me personally?

PRAYER

We praise you, loving creator, for bringing us into existence that we might search for you and find you. We thank you for your disclosure in Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God. Help us to see you and honour you in all that you have made; may we be stewards of creation that future generations may find joy in your cosmos. May Christ, who holds all things in being, hold us too that we may see your fullness in him. Amen.
The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel

2 Sam 5:1 Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. 2 For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” 3 So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. 4 David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. 5 At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading is chosen to show the roots of Jesus’ kingship in ancient biblical tradition, going back to David. This is commonly done in New Testament from Paul onwards (see Romans 1:1-7). The motive is double: to show the fidelity and consistency of God across the ages and to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of ancient longings and promises.

KIND OF WRITING

There is some discussion about the nature of these few verses. Broadly speaking, vv. 1-2 give us the thinking behind the choice of David; v. 3 recounts his becoming king; vv. 4-5 constitute a long look ahead to (or back over) the reign of David. Mostly, scholars think vv. 4-5 reflect the editing of the Deuteronomist, giving us a snapshot of the entire reign of David as king. There is less agreement about the relationship between vv. 1-2 and v. 3. It could be that vv. 1-2 refer to all of Israel, i.e. the twelve tribes together, while v. 3 refers to the northern tribes only. There seems to be some kind of doublet here—note the repetition of Israel—unless the name functions as an inclusion.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

2 Samuel is part of a grand theological project taking us from Joshua to 2 Kings (excluding Ruth). In Jewish tradition, these books are the Former Prophets. In contemporary scholarship, they constitute the Deuteronomistic History. It contains some of the very best writing in the Bible and, in more recent scholarship, has been much appreciated as literature.

RELATED PASSAGES

After this David inquired of the Lord, “Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?” The Lord said to him, “Go up.” David said, “To which shall I go up?” He said, “To Hebron.” So David went up there, along with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel, and Abigail the widow of Nahal of Carmel. David brought up the men who were with him, every one with his household; and they settled in the towns of Hebron. Then the people of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. When they told David, “It was the people of Jabesh-gilead who buried Saul,” David sent messengers to the people of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, “May you be blessed by the Lord, because you have done this thing. Therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant; for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them.” (2Samuel 2:1-7)

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. (2Samuel 7:8–11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The word for tribe here has two meanings: tribe and chief. If we read chief it would be a synonym for elders in v. 3. Hebron because Jerusalem had not yet been taken. Bone and flesh means family relationship. Cf. 2 Sam 19:13; Gen 29:14 and so forth. The man and wife echo from Gen 2 is less likely, because the king does not marry the people. The impression given is that this “installation” followed immediately on the assassination of Ishbosheth. However 2 Sam 2:10-11 and 3:4-5 lead one to think of a possible five-year gap.

Verse 2 Even during the reign of Saul, David had been effective ruler. This is the meaning of “led out” and “brought in.” Across the ancient Near East, shepherding is used a metaphor for both human and divine kingship. Cf. Ps 23. Ruler here means the “designated ruler” to be.

Verse 3 Perhaps we are not meant to think of a mutual covenant in the full sense but rather promises or reassurance guaranteed by oath. This verse is sometimes considered an older account of David’s coming to power. The key affirmation is YHWH’s election and the appointment of the people (theology and politics mixed as usual).

Verse 4 The numbers may be somewhat idealised. At thirty years, a man was supposed to be in his prime. Forty was taken to be the equivalent of a generation.

Verse 5 It is often thought that the uneven number may be accurate while forty represents a rounding up.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. To be chosen by your peers / relatives is a great gesture of appreciation. Has it been your experience to be singled out for some wider responsibilities?

2. Leadership is described as shepherding—i.e. presence among the flock, protection, guidance and nourishment. Have you experienced leaders like that? Have you, perhaps, been one?

PRAYER

God, you sent us Jesus to be our shepherd. May we recognise his voice, listen to his teaching and follow him as our guide. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.
THE LITURGY

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Psalm 122 (121); Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43

READINGS 1 AND 3
A theme across the New Testament is what kind of king Jesus would be as messiah. It is clear across the texts that he would rule not by power or dominance or force but by vulnerability. The question is raised historically in the ministry of Jesus and in the Synoptic trial narratives. It is raised analogously in John’s trial narrative and, in a remarkable way, in the book of Revelation. Note this famous verse: Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing still bearing the marks of one slain. (Revelation 5:6 NRSV adjusted).

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM
The great pilgrimage Psalm 122 (121) is used today, most likely because it mentions king David and speaks of God’s house.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS
First reading
2 Samuel 5:1-3
Recognising and choosing a leader is always important. David is the iconic king and the story is told today because Jesus’ roots go back to David himself.

Second reading
Colossians 1:12-20
For the feast, we hear an astonishing hymn or poem from Colossians. Why astonishing? When you recall that Jesus was a poor Galilean prophet, put to death by the Romans as a criminal, it is breathtaking what is said of him here!

Gospel
Jesus is a king is this story—but from a human point of view a very unusual king, who rules from the cross and whose gift is forgiveness and life eternal.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS
Monday 21 November
Presentation of the BVM
Apocalypse 14:1-5
A vision of heaven opens—for those who following the Lamb. The 144,000 is symbolic (12x12x1000) meaning the whole world, everyone.

Luke 21:1-4
Though brief, this is a powerful story. We all recognise that quantity is not the measure of the gift but quality of the giving, the attitude of the heart. The little anecdote is in sharp contrast to the preceding avarice of the scribes.

Tuesday 22 November
St Cecilia, virgin and martyr
Apocalypse 14:14-19
In this vision, the sufferings of the end of time are read using harvest imagery. Harvest, suggesting fruitfulness and ingathering, is a natural metaphor for the end of time.

Luke 21:5-11
Luke wrote long after the destruction of the Temple. The issue for him is not the destruction but the link between its ruin and the end of time. He writes to prevent useless speculation and insists that the end will not be at all secret but public.

Wednesday 23 November
St Columbanus, abbot and missionary
Apocalypse 15:1-4
In this vision, the victory over evil is accomplished. The hymn quoted was probably used in the regular worship of the hearers. It’s use here is to encourage those still undergoing significant harassment if not persecution.

Our gospels is a demanding teaching on the cost of bearing witness. As such, it looks forward to the Acts of the Apostles and there we see the early church suffering and courageously confessing Jesus. Jesus asks his disciples to follow his own example of costly faithfulness.

Thursday 24 November
Sts Andrew Dũng-Lacie and his Companions, Martyrs
Apocalypse 18:1-2, 21-23, 19:1-3, 9
Today’s reading is a fantastical mock funeral for the forces of evil, represented by Babylon (¼ the Roman Empire).

Thankfully, it ends positively.

There are two fairly distinct parts to our Gospel today. Firstly, Luke looks back on the actual destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans. He reads the tragedy in the light of Old Testament predictions. The second part looks forward to the future coming of the Son of Man. For Luke, the extended “time of the church” leads to the end of time itself, at which point the believers will have nothing to fear. Meanwhile, we are to undergo conversion and to bear witness.

Friday 25 November
St Catherine of Alexandria
Apocalypse 20:1-4, 11-21
A dramatic vision of the end, with the destruction of evil, illustrated with ancient imagery of Satan, the Abyss and the book of life. Then God will establish the New Jerusalem, presenting her like a bride adorned.

Luke 21:29-33
A little horticulture may help. The fig blossoms in late spring so it means that summer will soon arrive. The reference to “this generation” was already out of date, so to speak, when Luke wrote. Perhaps for him it points not to this very generation but to the generation at the end of time.

Saturday 26 November
Apocalypse 21:1-7
A marvellous image of the New Jerusalem, without Temple, because God will be our light. The New Testament Apocalypse ends on a resoundingly positive note. The Bible begins in the heavenly garden and it ends in the heavenly city.

Just because the end is not yet is no reason for relaxing. For Luke, the urgency of discipleship remains—that is, the urgency of our continued conversion, our prayer, our service, our bearing witness. The delay is the coming is not a reason for complacency.

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