

The Second Word

by W.R. Inge

The sermon tells the story of the thief on the cross, who was transformed by the power of Christ's right hand and prayed for remembrance and mercy, illustrating the importance of trusting in God with a whole heart.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 51:17, Ezekiel 18:23, Luke 23:39, James 4:8

Topics: "Repentance And Faith", "Gods Mercy"

Description

W.R. Inge preaches about the powerful transformation of the thief on the cross next to Jesus, who went from reviling Christ to repenting and confessing Him as the Son of God. This thief's sudden change of heart and unwavering faith in Jesus, even in the face of death, showcases the infinite mercy and compassion of God, who forgave him and promised him a place in paradise. Through the thief's example, we are reminded of the importance of genuine repentance, humility, and turning to God with a contrite heart, as God desires not the death of a sinner but their conversion and life.

Transcript

NOW the thieves who were crucified with Jesus reviled Him. But after a while, the one who hung on the right side of Christ, when he saw His great patience and long-suffering, wherewith He so lovingly prayed to His Father for those who cast reproaches upon Him and cruelly tortured Him, became entirely changed, and began to be moved with very great sorrow and repentance for his sins. And he showed this outwardly, when he rebuked his fellow-thief, who continued to revile Christ, saying: "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

"Although" (he would say) "thou art so obstinate as not to fear men, and thinkest nought of thy bodily pain, yet surely thou must fear God, in the last moments of thy life--God, who hath power to destroy both thy body and soul in hell. And though we suffer the same punishment with Him, our deserts are very different. We, indeed, suffer justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this man hath done nothing amiss." He, who but lately was a blasphemer, is now a confessor and preacher, he distinguishes good from evil, blaming the sinner, and excusing the innocent: the unbelieving thief has become the confessor of almighty God.

O good Jesus, this sudden change is wrought by Thy right hand, at which he hung. Thy right hand touched him inwardly, and forthwith he is changed into another man. O Lord, in this Thou hast declared Thy patience, out of a stone Thou hast raised up a child unto Abraham. Verily, the penitent thief received the light of faith solely from that bright light on the candlestick of the Cross, which shone there in the

darkness and scattered the shades of night. But what does this signify, save that our Lord Jesus, out of the greatness of His goodness, looked upon him with the eyes of His mercy, although He found no merit in him, except what it pleased Him out of His goodness to bestow?

For as God gives to His elect, out of His goodness alone, what no one has a right to demand, so out of His justice He gives to the wicked what they deserve. For this cause David says: "He saved me because He desired me." And this is why the thief, before the Lord touched his heart with the beams of His grace and love, joined the other thief in reviling Christ, thus showing first what his own character was, and afterwards what was wrought in him by grace. At first he acted like the other, being, like him, a child of wrath; but when the precious blood of Christ was shed as the price of our redemption and paid to the Father for our debt, then the thief asked God to give him an alms for his good, and at once received it.

For how can one alms diminish that inexhaustible treasure? How could our tender Lord, whose property is always to have mercy, have refused his request? Indeed He gave him more than he asked. Yet how could the thief escape the glow of the fire which was burning so near him? Truly this was the fire, which the Father had sent down from heaven to earth, which had long smouldered, but now, kindled anew, and fed by the wood of the Cross, and sprinkled with the oil of mercy, and fanned, as it were, by the reproaches and blasphemies of the Jews, sent up its flames to heaven, by which that thief was quite kindled and set on fire, and his love became as strong as death, so that he said: "I indeed suffer no grievous penalty, for it is less than I deserve; but that this innocent One, who has done no wrong, should be so tortured, contrary to justice and righteousness, this, truly, adds grievous sorrow to my sorrow."

O splendid faith of this thief! He contemned all the punishment that might be inflicted on him: he feared not the rage of the people, who were barking like mad dogs against Jesus: he cared not for the chief priests: he feared not the executioners with their weapons and instruments of torture; but in the presence of them all, with a fearless heart he confessed that Christ was the true Son of God, and Lord of the whole world: and at the same time he confounded the Jews by confessing that He had done nothing amiss, and therefore that they had crucified Him unjustly.

O wondrous faith! O mighty constancy! O amazing love of this poor thief, love that cast out all fear! He was indeed well drunken with that new wine which in the wine-press of the Cross had been pressed out of that sweet cluster, Jesus Christ, and therefore he confessed Christ without shame before all the people. At the very beginning of the Passion, the apostles and disciples had forsaken Christ and fled; even St Peter, frightened by the voice of one maidservant, had denied Christ.

But this poor thief did not forsake Him even in death, but confessed Him to be the Lord of heaven in the presence of all those armed men. Who can do justice to the merits of this man? Who taught him so quickly that faith of his, and his clear knowledge of all the virtues, save the very Wisdom of the Father, Jesus Christ, who hung near him on the Cross? Him whom the Jews could not or would not know, in spite of the promises made to the patriarchs, the fulfilment of prophecies, the teaching of the Scriptures, and the interpretation of allegories, this poor thief learned to know by repentance.

He confessed Christ to be the Son of God, though he saw Him full of misery, want, and torment, and dying from natural weakness. He confessed Him at a time when the apostles, who had seen His mighty works, denied Him. The nails were holding his hands and feet fixed to the cross; he had nothing free about him, except his heart and his tongue; yet he gave to God all that he could give to Him, and, in the words of Scripture, "with his heart he believed unto righteousness, and with his tongue he made confession of

Christ unto salvation."

O infinite and unsearchable mercy of God! For what manner of man was he when he was sent to the cross, and what when he left it? (Not that it was his own cross, that wrought this change, but the power of Christ crucified.) He came to the cross stained with the blood of his fellow-man; he was taken down from it cleansed by the blood of Christ. He came to the cross still savage and full of rage, and while he was upon it he became so meek and pitiful that he lamented for the sufferings of another more than for his own.

One member only was left to him, and at the eleventh hour he came to work in God's vineyard, and yet so eagerly did he labour that he was the first to finish his work and receive his reward. Indeed he behaved like a just man; for he first accused himself and confessed his sins, saying, "and we, indeed, justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds." Secondly, he excused Christ, and confessed that He was the Just One when he said "but this Man hath done nothing amiss." Thirdly, he showed brotherly love, for he said, "dost not thou fear God?"

Fourthly, with all his members, or at least with all that he could offer, and with loving eyes and a devout heart and a humble spirit, he turned himself to Christ and prayed earnestly, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom." How great was the justice and humility and resignation which he showed in this prayer, for he asked only for a little remembrance of himself, acknowledging that he was not worthy to ask for anything great. Nor did he pray for the safety of his body, for he gladly desired to die for his sins.

It was more pleasant for him to die with Christ than to live any longer. Nor did he pray that our Lord would deliver him from the pains of hell, or of purgatory, nor did he ask for the kingdom of heaven; but he resigned himself entirely to the will of God, and offered himself altogether to Christ, to do what He would with him. In his humility he prayed for nothing except for grace and mercy, for which David also prayed when he said, "Deal with Thy servant according to Thy mercy."

And therefore, because he had prayed humbly and wisely, the Eternal Wisdom, Who reads the hearts of all who pray, heard his prayer, and, opening wide the rich storehouse of His grace, bestowed upon him much more than he had dared to ask. O marvellous goodness of God! How plainly dost Thou declare in this, that Thou desirest not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live. Now Thou hast manifested and fulfilled what Thou didst promise aforetime by Thy prophet: "When the wicked man shall mourn for his sins, I will remember his iniquity no more."

Thou didst not impose upon him many years of severe penance, nor many sufferings in purgatory for the expiation of his sins; but just as if Thou hadst quite forgotten his crimes, and couldst see nothing in him but virtue, Thou didst say: "This day shalt thou be with Me in paradise." O immeasurable compassion of God! Our tender Lord forgot all the countless crimes which that poor thief had done, and forgave him when he repented, and gave so great and splendid a reward to the good which there was in him, small indeed though it was.

Our loving God is very rich; He needs not our gifts; but He seeks for a heart which turns to Him with lowliness and resignation, such a heart as He found in this poor thief. For He says Himself: "turn to Me, and I will turn to you." And so when this thief so courageously and effectively turned to God, his prayer was at once not only accepted but answered. For our Lord did not reject his prayer, or say to him: "See how I hang here in torment, and I behold before My eyes My mother in sore affliction, and I have not yet spoken one word to her, so that to hear thee now would not be just."

No, our Lord said nothing of this kind to the thief. Rather, He heard his prayer at once, and made answer in that sweet word, "Amen, I say unto thee, this day shalt thou be with Me in paradise." O tender goodness, O marvellous mercy of God! O great wisdom of the thief! He saw that the treasures of Christ were wide open, and were being scattered abroad. Who then should forbid him to take as much as would pay what he owed to his Lord? And O the accursed hardness of the impenitent thief, whom neither the rebuke of his associate, nor the patience of Christ, nor the many signs of love and mercy that shone forth in Christ, could melt or convert!

He saw that alms were plentiful at the rich man's gate, that more was given than was asked for, and yet he was too proud and obstinate to ask. He saw that life and the kingdom of heaven were being granted, and yet he would not bend his heart to wish for them: therefore he shall not have them. He loved better revilings and curses, and they shall come unto him, and that for all eternity. These new first-fruits of the grape, which our Lord gathered on the wood of the Cross from our barren soil, by much sweat of His brow and much watering with His own precious blood, He sent with great joy as a precious gift to His heavenly Father, by His celestial messengers the holy angels.

But if there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, how must they rejoice and exult at the salvation of this thief, of whom they had almost despaired? We can picture to ourselves with what joy the Father of heaven received these first-fruits of the harvest of His Son's Passion. But Christ Himself, though He felt some joy at the thief's conversion, was still more afflicted thereby, for by His wisdom He foresaw that this thief would be the cause of perdition to many, who would resolve to pass their whole lives in sin, hoping to obtain pardon and grace at the moment of death.

Truly a most foolish hope, for nowhere in the Scriptures do we read that it has so happened to any man. In truth, they who seek after God only when they must, will not, it is to be feared, find Him near them in their time of need. In the meantime, none can trust too much in God, and no one has ever been forsaken by Him, who has turned to Him with his whole heart, and leant upon Him with loving confidence.

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