

Reflections

Father Nicolas Schwizer

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Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise

When the good thief says those amazing words: *“Remember me when You get to your Kingdom.”* It is not known what to admire most: if the simplicity of his words, if his lack of ambitions, or if his marvelous faith. Really, how tremendous is his faith which pushes him to believe without the least hesitation that this dying person will end up triumphant.

In this thief, there is no confusion. He does not expect another kingdom nor another royalty but those on the other side of death. He does not ask for triumphant restorations of this world like the apostles; he does not acclaim Christ as victorious here below like the enthusiasts of Palm Sunday. He knows both are going to die. And he is certain, nevertheless, that there is a Kingdom which awaits them.

This profession of faith by the good thief is one of the most extraordinary facts in history. It is difficult to imagine something so improbable (unlikely). And, nevertheless, so real.

The surprising words from this man are going to force Jesus to respond. He did not do it when the other thief insulted him. But now he cannot keep quiet. The good thief has pointed his arrow well. *“Truly I tell you – He responds – today you will be with me in paradise.”* The response could not be fuller of meanings. It opens with “truly I tell you” which, for a Jew, had all the meaning of an oath, of a solemn promise. And then He offers the thief much more than what he asked for.

If there was faith in the words of the thief, there is a sovereign serenity in the response of Jesus, a certainty which opens wide to us the mystery of his divinity. How, if not, this dying man who has failed ostentatiously can have that security to promise not only something, but paradise itself?

Strictly speaking, at this moment, Christ did nothing other than fulfill promises made much earlier: *“Those who declare publicly that they belong to me, I will do the same for them before my Father in heaven”* (MT 10,32).

Now they were being fulfilled, although still in hope. “You will be,” is in the future tense. A few more atrocious hours must still be spent in the torment. But that future tense is almost a present tense.

Truly, the true reward which Jesus promises to the good thief is not in the word “paradise,” but in the words “with me.” Because to be with Christ is exactly to be already in paradise.

In the liturgical calendar, filled with saints, there is a place and a feast is celebrated for those who were that day on Calvary. For the Virgin, naturally. For St. John. Also for Mary Magdalen. There is even a place for those absent. For the first Pope, wherever he might have gone to cry out his own being negative. For all the other apostles, hidden like rats in the hole of their fear.

But for him, for the good thief, there is no place in the calendar of the Saints. The Evangelists have even forgotten to present him to us. We do not know his name, even though the Christian tradition has named him Dimas.

His feastday should be celebrated on Good Friday. But, logically, that day is not adequate. Anyway, with a little bit of good will and making an effort to remedy the situation, some solution could have been found. But probably the idea was to avoid complications. Would the “good Christians” have accepted as a model a person poorly recommended who entered to form part of “our own” only in the last minutes of his non-edifying existence?

Nevertheless and in spite of everything, this uncomfortable and not well recommended personality, not even after his death – is in reality the only saint directly canonized by Christ: “I assure you: this very day you will be with me in paradise.”

I think this was enough for him. This was more than enough.

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