

Introductory

This text has similar parallels in the synoptics and John. The Penitent Thief is exclusive to Luke. This lesson is not found in the TLH one-year series and is an alternate reading for the Last Sunday in LW series C. On the Last Sunday of the Church Year, the texts from LSB series A and B deal with the end times. In LSB year C it's the Penitent Thief.

The Rock Island and Clinton Circuits each do a Tre Ore service on Good Friday, and the theme is often the Seven Last Words, including this reading from Luke. Many pastors do mid-week Lenten series on the same thing, and the Lutherans have been pulling it out of their proof-text bag for years to prove that purgatory is not a teaching found in the Bible.

All four gospels talk about the two thieves. Luke's account is the most detailed and thorough. This would be a good time to purchase a Gospel Parallels or look one up on the Interweb. Comparing the accounts, filling in the blanks gives us a thorough account of what transpired on and around those three crosses between those two and Jesus.

Matthew (27: 38) mentions that "two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left," relates how various people mocked Jesus, and then (44) notes that the "robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him in the same way," but Matthew does not quote them.

Mark notes in chapter 13 the same things in his account, that "with Him they crucified two robbers, one on His right and one on His left," (v. 27), that Jesus was reviled, and that "those who were crucified with Him also reviled Him." (v. 32)

John, who watched the scene play out "from a distance," seems to think the positioning of Jesus and the two robbers is important, saying in 19:18 that "They crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them."

The Penitent Thief ("the thief on the cross") has become axiomatic for a person who experiences a death-bed conversion to Christianity. We do not know either of the two men who are crucified with Jesus until we meet them while they are hanging on their respective crosses either side of Jesus.

Mr. Obvious notes that they have both done something bad enough to have been judged worthy of the death penalty. He further notes that Roman, not Jewish, justice is being administered. According to Catholic Encyclopedia,

Crucifixion, under the Roman Law, was usually reserved for slaves and the worst kind of evildoers. The incidents of crucifixion were that the

criminal, after the pronouncement of sentence, carried his cross to the place of execution, a custom mentioned by Plutarch and other writers as well as in the Gospels. Scourging was inflicted upon the persons executed as in the case of other capital punishments among the Romans. Grotius and other writers have called attention to the fact that the scourging of Christ was not in accordance with the Roman usage, because it was inflicted before the sentence of death was pronounced. The criminal was next stripped of his clothes, and nailed or bound to the cross. The latter was the more painful method, as the sufferer was left to die of hunger. Instances are recorded of persons who survived nine days. The Romans usually left the body on the cross after death.

The Reformed and Anabaptist want to make hay out of the fact that it is not recorded that the thief was ever baptized, arguing that therefore you don't have to be baptized to go to heaven, and that therefore it would be wrong for them to baptize their babies. They prove too much; if you can get to heaven without being baptized, then why bother?

So it is that many of them don't, or they wait, and many are also jettisoning the Sacrament of the Altar. Actually, they would say that you bother because God told us to do this, or that in baptism you are showing that you are accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, which is what People of the Law are going to do.

The Lutheran response to Baptism of the thief not being recorded is to say that of course he was baptized, and it's such a no-brainer that none of the writers mention it, some even speculating that he had at some point received John's Baptism. Ya, either that or the thief was not baptized, which is ok, because he does not *have to* be baptized to go to heaven.

We need look no further than the verse from Mark that the Catechism quotes, "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" to see this. Jesus could easily have added to "does not believe" the words "is not baptized," but He didn't. Unbelief damns, and belief saves.

Such belief comes by Word and Sacrament, and normally Baptism follows conversion, but these are anything but normal circumstances. It ought also to be noted here that the institution of Trinitarian Baptism will not happen until sometime prior to the Ascension.

It would be good to review the events of Holy Week leading up to the Crucifixion. They are important events in and of themselves, and talking about them helps to set the context for what is going on here. The immediate context has Jesus on His way to Golgotha, Simon of Cyrene carrying His cross,

Textual Notes

27. As He heads for execution, “Ἠκολούθει δὲ αὐτῷ πολὺ πλῆθος τοῦ λαοῦ - there was following Him a great multitude of the people.” For those of you who are keeping score, this would be the eighth station of the cross. The noun λαός is the word used to refer to Israel/Judah. They are His own ilk, and He may have been encouraged by their presence.

Or maybe not. What were they doing there? I think they were doing what Americans were doing when they went into town for a hanging. The concept is mostly lost on modern Americans, who are more likely to turn their faces from an execution, not wanting to watch. In those days, crucifixion was an occasion to gather in community.

Luke tells us that the crowd includes “γυναικῶν αἱ ἐκόπτοντο καὶ ἐθρήνουν αὐτόν - women, mourning and lamenting for Him.” The first verb means “to cut off” or “to strike,” and it refers to the self – flagellation often associated with a funeral in those days. The second verb refers to an audible crying out, also often associated with a funeral.

On some level, the crowd was feeling sorry for Jesus, like you would feel sorry for anyone who is walking The Green Mile. It wasn’t so much that the man was going to die. Death happened all the time, and He had lived nearly the average life expectancy. Worse, He was dying childless, and His legacy would die with Him, or so they thought.

28. There are a lot of people there, and He could have talked to any of them, but it is to these mourning women Jesus turns His attention, and they – not the crowds – become the focus of His attention. They are not numbered, and they are not named, and they may or may not have been the same women who were later present at the foot of the cross.

He’s having a bad day, and we found out earlier (26) that He’s unable to carry His own cross, but even in His anguish, Jesus makes the effort “στραφεὶς δὲ πρὸς αὐτάς - turning towards them.” And having turned towards them, He speaks to them, saying “Θυγατέρες Ἰερουσαλήμ, μὴ κλαίετε ἐπ’ ἐμέ· - daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me.”

The daughters of Jerusalem – they seem to be the same group as the daughters of Zion – are the faithful, tough, spunky women of Israel. The phrase that appears several times in Song of Songs. Keil-Delitzsch says that the “daughters of Jerusalem” are “the ladies of the palace” and that they are “the congregation already believing on the Messiah.”

He continues speaking to these women, saying; “πλὴν ἐφ’ ἑαυτάς κλαίετε καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν - but weep for yourselves and for your children.” He’s going to be okay, and more than okay. In a few short days, He will be enjoying the bliss of heaven forever, and they and their children will be left behind, stuck on this fallen planet until they die.

29. He then gives the reason why they should weep for their children; the day is coming when they will say “Μακάριαι αἱ στεῖραι, καὶ αἱ κοιλίαι αἱ οὐκ ἐγέννησαν, καὶ μαστοὶ οἱ οὐκ ἔθρεψαν - blessed the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed,” or “it will have been better for your children if they had not been born.”

It used to be awkward to talk about mothers who “gave suck,” but now “to nurse” has become part of the vernacular, and you can even see it actually going on sometimes. If they are feeling sorry for Him that He will die childless, then He is telling them that their children – life under the Roman occupation was always hard, but it will get worse.

In fewer than forty years from the Crucifixion, the Romans will wreak vengeance on Jerusalem, and great slaughter on her inhabitants. You are familiar with the destruction of Jerusalem and Temple in 70. It was at that time that Christians fled to Pella and Jews to Masada, where the Romans hunted them down, besieged them, and more bloodshed.

I’ve been saying “70 A.D., Anno Domini, Year of our Lord” a lot in sermons and in teaching. I’m trying to educate people as to the meaning of “A.D.,” and more to the point I’m trying to combat the migration from that old, revered, and well understood term to “C.A., Common Era,” but they years are still counted from the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

It was the children of this generation who would be on the wrong side of those gruesome events, and who would suffer greatly. That was then, this is now, and two millennia after the fact, you could say the same about much of Christian history. Things are especially difficult these days for Christians in the Middle East, China, Africa, and North Korea.

Keep those persecuted Christians before your people. Pray for them, and we should think twice maybe before calling ourselves persecuted. It cheapens real persecution suffered.

30. Things will get so bad that people will desire the mountains to fall on them, etc. See Josephus and Tacitus et al for more historic background on the coming events. The anti-Christian leftist History channel did a program *ISIS: Reign of Terror* about the doings of that group when they were busily establishing a caliphate, and it was actually pretty good.

They left things out, and they played fast and loose with factual things, like they do, but by now we know how to steer through that. They did a good job of showing how miserable is life for the hoi polloi in that part of the world. For Christians there, I could see that you would be looking forward to going through the door into heaven.

Several Commentators say something similar to what Cambridge Study Bible says,

to the mountains, Fall on us] Comp. [Hosea 10:8](#). Hundreds of the Jews at the end of the siege hid themselves in subterranean recesses, and no less than 2000 were killed by being buried under the ruins of these hiding-places (Jos. B. J. vi. 9, § 4). We cannot fail to see in these events something of what St John calls “the wrath of the Lamb,” [Revelation 6:16](#). Even a terror is entreated as a relief from yet more horrible calamities.

31. He continues in an apocalyptic tone by talking about trees, using what may have been a common proverb or saying whose meaning has been lost – including to many of the commentators, who throw in the towel – but it isn’t that hard to figure out. If what is happening to Him can happen to Him, what hope is there for those who are not Him?

In the Bible, young and green trees are good and bear fruit, while trees that are dead do not bear fruit and are good only for making fire. Consistent with other times when He used tree language, this is a reference to the coming calamity that will befall Israel; part and parcel of those same events of 70 A.D., Anno Domini, Year of Our Lord.

Bengel gives it a shot,

A remarkable passage occurs in Joseph., B. vi. de B. J. ch. 44. f 968, ed Lips. “When the soldiers were wearied out in killing the Jews, and a great multitude seemed still to be left surviving, Cæsar ordered that those alone who were armed and offered resistance should be slain, and that the rest should be made captives. But the soldiers μετὰ (the sense requires κατὰ) τῶν παρηγγελμένων, contrary to what had been commanded, slew the old and feeble (ΤΟΥΣ ΑΣΘΕΝΕΙΣ), (ΤΟ Δ’ ΑΚΜΑΖΟΝ), but shut up in confinement those who were vigorous and serviceable,” etc.

Speaking of the Year of Our Lord, about three years ago, I discovered that the terms began to be used mostly by Jewish scholars around the middle of the nineteenth century, but so why the word “common” and what does that mean? What it means is that in Jewish thought, a person or thing is either kosher and clean or “common” and unclean.

The meaning of the term is that the Christian era is seen by people who use those terms as the “common” or the “unclean” era. It is seen by them as the time when unclean people and their religion took over the world, which the Christian religion has, while the Jewish religion has not fared quite so well. Liberal Christians and Atheists also prefer C.E.

A couple of observations; 1. When Christians use those terms – they are widely used on U.S. college campi – do they actually know and understand what they’re calling themselves? 2. We Christians generally don’t get bent out of shape about silly things. Many of the days of the week, many months, and Easter are pagan names, but so what?

Wednesday is a day in the week, and it’s being named after a pagan god is irrelevant, and we don’t even think about it. Easter has become a Christian observance of the rising of Jesus from the dead, and few of us even know about the pagan origins of the name, or care. I am dissuaded from reading books where authors insist on calling me “unclean.”

32. We are now introduced to “κακοῦργοι δύο – two criminals,” who were also going to be put to death. Stop calling them “malefactors,” a word that is not part of our modern vocabulary. We don’t talk that way, but everybody knows what a criminal is, and the translators get it right, except for several direct descendants of KJV, just more LBT.

We don’t know their exact crime, and I used to say that they had done something serious enough to be given the death penalty, which is true. But capital punishment was meted out a lot more frequently and for a lot more crimes than it is today; the death penalty was at one time ruled unconstitutional. Even now, where it’s used, it’s used very sparingly.

Many states don’t have that sort of punishment on the books, and some states that have it don’t use it. When DNA evidence cleared several executed people in Illinois of guilt – it’s hard to put that toothpaste back into the tube – they suspended carrying out capital punishment, and that’s been several years ago. In Iowa they got rid of it in 1963.

The point is that the idea that people could be killed as a punishment for crimes – in England they were still executing pickpockets in the 1800, and a lot of things could get you executed there until fairly recently – the idea is foreign to a lot of your hearers, and to mine in Iowa especially. The Romans – they executed people early and often.

33. The procession comes to a place “καλούμενον Κρανίον – called the Skull,” which is generally thought to be a skull-shaped hill outside Jerusalem. You can google that and see a multitude of images that indeed look something like a skull today. It may well have looked like that in that time, maybe not. Topographical features often change over time.

More plausible is the idea that the place gets its name from the preponderance of human skulls that littered the place. The thinking goes like this; if nobody claimed them, these bodies were left hanging there. Animals then came and carried them away piece by piece to consume them, but no animal could carry a skull in its mouth; so, place of the skull.

34. When Jesus says, “Πάτερ, ἄφεξ αὐτοῖς· οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν – Father forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing,” to whom does the “they” refer? It refers to the ones who don’t “οἶδασιν – know” what they are doing. That verb is the perfect active indicative of εἶδω. Vine distinguishes this verb from “γινώσκω – to know,”

That verb “γινώσκω – to know,” Vine says, “frequently suggests inception or progress in knowledge, while *oida* suggests fullness of knowledge.” The perfect indicative “expresses a *focus upon result, the state which follows upon past activity*” (FGG). That verb “*oida* – to know” is used here, and it’s talking about “fullness of knowledge.”

If I were to paraphrase what that statement says, it would be something like; they don’t have a clue what’s really going on here. Who doesn’t have a clue? The Roman soldiers, who are just doing their jobs, the two men who were with Jesus on their own crosses, the sheep who are without a shepherd, really don’t understand exactly what is going on here.

The Roman execution squad knows that they are executing these men, but when it comes to their execution of Jesus, they have no understanding of the deeper meaning of His death. However, the religious leaders knew full well what they were doing, and so are not among those who “know not what they do.” Jesus is not asking forgiveness for them.

35. Two groups are singled out as being those who “ἐξεμυκτήριζον – were mocking” Him; Firstly, the “λαός – people” are there, as well as the “ἀρχοντες – rulers” the religious leaders of Judaism, presumably the same people who are responsible for His being on the cross. The verb occurs only twice in the NT, both in Luke’s Gospel.

In 16:14, the Pharisees are said to respond like this (mocking) when Jesus talked to them about their assets and God. It means to turn one’s nose up, a physical posture that indicates the utter contempt of a thing that is repulsive. Here, it is Jesus Who is causing these people to do what they do with their noses. The crucifixion is not a pleasant thing.

Oh, wait, now they’re talking, “λέγοντες ἄλλους ἔσωσεν, σωσάτω ἑαυτόν – saying ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself.’” The verb is a present active participle, they kept it up while the people stood by and observed. By their words we see that these religious leaders think that Jesus taught that He has saved others, and He did teach just that.

They also think that that He thinks that He is the Christ, and that He thinks Himself to be the One who is “ἐκλεκτός – chosen” of God. In all of these things, they are correct, yet they themselves don’t believe any of it. They are, in fact, mocking Him for thinking those things about Himself; How can He save others when He can’t even save self?

36. Enter the Roman soldiers, who “ἐνέπαιζαν δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ στρατιῶται προσερχόμενοι, ὄξος προσφέροντες αὐτῷ - also mocked Him and, going near offering to Him vinegar.” This word “mocked” is different from the one above. This word is more common in the NT – it has twelve occurrences besides this, almost all in connection with crucifixion.

Once the word is used to refer to how the Magi “tricked” Herod. The root is often used in connection with sport, and here perhaps they were making fun of Him like we used to make fun of the Cubs. Some of the nastiest jeering I ever heard were from English football – our soccer. If you drew Crucifixion duty, you might as well have fun with it.

Some of the translations call it “sour wine” and some call it “vinegar,” which is wine that has gone bad, and I think it was probably like the Boone’s Farm of the day, Strawberry Hill, but don’t say that. The participle indicates that they kept up their attempts to give this drink to Jesus, from which we may conclude that He refused repeatedly to drink it.

Once I said it was like Boone’s Farm, and a lady in the hand shaking line told me she likes Boone’s Farm, Strawberry Hill, drinks it all the time. So I don’t say that anymore.

37. When Satan attacked Jesus in the wilderness, he made frequent use of the conditional conjunction “if.” When Jesus resisted those temptations, Satan left Him, only to return,

Luke told us at “a more opportune time.” That opportune time of which Luke spoke earlier is now at hand, and we hear Satan, speaking through the mouths of His pastors.

Once again using that conditional conjunction, Satan says to Jesus, “Εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, σῶσον σεαυτὸν – If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” Satan, knowing that if Jesus should do what he is proposing, nobody else will be saved, but will be condemned to Hell for eternity, would like nothing better than for Jesus to do just that.

His appeal to Jesus is not only for instant gratification for Him, but for Him to save Himself from death, which is a very common human emotion. But Jesus knows what Satan knows, and His sacrifice of self is no more clearly seen than here. Unlike a lot of people, He has the very real chance to save self, and He gave it up to save all people.

38. We all know all about the words printed over His head in three languages, and Luke’s placing those words in the middle of the insults that are not yet done leaves little doubt as to Pilate’s purpose in putting them there. He despised the Jews, they had just forced his hand to make him crucify an innocent man, and how does that taste, my Jewish friends?

39. Now the two men who flank Him join in. Putting together the synoptic accounts, it appears that both criminals were trash talking at first, but later on the one apparently has a change of heart, and so he comes down to us with a title; The Penitent Thief. Luke tells us that “κακούργων ἐβλασφήμει αὐτόν – the criminal blasphemed against Him.”

They are called “κακούργους”, literally “evil doers,” a general word for a person who has committed a crime, and so probably is also and again best translated “criminals.” That the man was blaspheming Jesus means that he was using religious language – using God’s Name – and vocabulary to hurl curses at Jesus. The man appears to be agitated.

The man’s question to Jesus “Οὐχὶ σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός; – aren’t you the Christ” expects an affirmative answer. I don’t think He believed that about Jesus, but he seems to know that Jesus thinks that about Himself. He sounds like one of the criminals in Prison Break, hurling the aorist imperative “σῶσον σεαυτὸν καὶ ἡμᾶς – save yourself and us” at Jesus.

So we have Satan speaking to Jesus first through the pastors, then through the soldiers, and now from the mouth of a criminals or more. In other places, we have him speaking similar words using the mouths of the crowds, who also mocked Jesus. This great cacophony must have on some level gotten to Him. Bring fully human, how could it not?

40. The Penitent Thief would not be the first man to lose his mojo upon finding himself staring death in the face. He apparently has a change of heart, and any talk of exactly the man’s spiritual state prior to this or what specifically caused his change of heart would be speculation and should be avoided. God made a Christian that day on that hill.

He speaks to the blasphemer; “ἐπιτιμῶν αὐτῷ ἔφη – rebuking him and saying” The verb “ἐπιτιμῶν – rebuking” is a present active participle. The man on one side of Jesus is

using his last minutes on earth and the last words that he would ever speak to let forth a steady stream of curses against the Son of God. The other man tells him to put a lid on it.

41. The Penitent appeals to whatever knowledge the man may have of God, and he points out that the reason why they are both here is because they have been guilty of criminal acts. The Christian realizes that Jesus finds Himself on a cross for a different reason; He confesses that “οὗτος δὲ οὐδὲν ἄτοπον ἔπραξεν – this man has done nothing wrong.”

42. And then the Christian asks Jesus to “μνήσθητί μου ὅταν ἔλθῃς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν σου – remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The word “μνήσθητι – remember” is often used in the OT and the NT when God – He never forgets – is about to act. In Exodus, Moses tells us that God “remembered” His people who were enslaved in Egypt.

It is by the hand of man that the death of Jesus is about to take place. After that, God the Father will act to resurrect Jesus, and by that death, and especially by that Resurrection, He will bring about the establishment of His Kingdom. Inherent in the statement is the man’s belief that Jesus brings the Kingdom; he has faith, and he wants a piece of that.

43. Jesus assures the Christian that it will happen, yet today, saying “σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ Παραδείσῳ - today you will be with me in paradise.” His response to the man is straightforward. The key words there are “today” and “paradise.” The perceived problem with “today” is not with the thief, who died that same day, and went to heaven.

The perceived problem is with Jesus being in “paradise” with him *that day*. The time frame of the next three days is in some ways very clear, but in some ways rather sketchy. We know when Jesus died, and we know when He rose. We also know that He descended into hell and that it was a victorious descent, but that’s really all we know.

We don’t have information about when exactly that descent took place, so we don’t know exactly *when* it happened, but this text would indicate that it happened within that day and that Jesus then that same day went to heaven to be with this and every other Christian who is there on that very day, which would be ending in a few hours, at sundown.

Review FC IX to see how the Lutherans cop to not knowing a lot about the descent, and about how they think speculation about things we don’t know can be harmful.

Having said all of that, there is perhaps a component here of not fully understanding the Person of Christ and the Trinity. The second person of the Trinity, at this time hanging on a cross, is also everywhere, including in heaven. There’s nothing that would prevent this same Jesus from meeting up in heaven with the man later on that same day

That is – understood in the strictest sense and as rendered by every English translation I’m looking at – is what He seems to be saying to the man here. Grammatically, you could have Jesus saying, “I say to you today, ‘you will be with me in paradise.’” Bengel says that it’s not that because Jesus never says that phrase in any other place in the NT.

“Paradise” is a Middle Eastern word that means “garden” in the Middle Eastern sense. I say that because if you look in my “garden” you will find tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, and other crops. A Middle Eastern “garden” would be a green place with a lot of foliage where one would go on a sort of mini-vacation, or for refuge from the cares of the world.

Their “garden” in that time and place was much more like the English or Irish gardens than what Americans mean when they think of a “garden.” Those gardens are very pleasant to be in, to stroll in, to sit in, and some of them all seasons. There could in that world have been no greater contrast than that of “paradise” to crucifixion’s agony.

Go ahead and talk about those English and Irish gardens to give people a better idea of what heaven will be like. (I do not know if there will be actual hermits or not in heaven.) Go ahead and talk about the restoration of creation, only new and different and better, and that will be heaven. You can never talk too much about heaven from the pulpit.

Law/Gospel

Impenitent/Penitent – The impenitent person is the one who does not want to change, the one who thinks that all is good and that he will go to heaven when he dies. The penitent person is the one who knows that all is not good and that he will go to hell when he died. He changes from belief in self to belief in Christ, a change wrought by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, the Spirit that “makes willing hearts of the unwilling.” (Augustine)

Death/Life – The thief is facing death; first physical, then spiritual. In an instant he goes to facing life; first physical, then spiritual. Since that is the one thing in the end that will matter, that is a big deal.

Misery/Paradise – Along those same lines, can there be any bigger deal or huger contrast than that between hell and heaven. Piece together a description of hell and we come up with a place that you really can’t stand to think about for very long. Look at heaven at “paradise,” a place far different, a place that you almost can’t stop thinking about. People think all the time about what it would be like to be rich, and they think of it even more since lotteries were made legal. Play on that desire to be rich by telling them that they will be one day, just wait for it.

Sermon Titles

“If”

“If you are the Christ”

“Three Men”

“Today, in Paradise”

“What is Paradise?”

“This is the King of the Jews”

Hymns

“O Worship the King” LSB 804

“Jesus, in Your Dying Woes” LSB 447 Second Word

"All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" LSB 549

“Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise” LSB 680

“At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing” LSB 633

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