

## **Paradise Now!**

Sunday, 15 March, 2015, ds. Don Mader

Scripture lessons: Luke 23:39-43; I Thessalonians 4:13-18

The traditional second words from the cross are one of the most problematic – as well as one of the most encouraging – passages in scripture.

They share a basic problem with all of the words from the cross: who would have been there to record them? Were told elsewhere in the gospels that all of the male disciples fled, dispersed, after Jesus' arrest in the Garden; Peter alone dared go as far as hanging out on the edges of the crowd at the residence of the High Priest, but then, when he was recognized, denied knowing this Jesus, and left; most surely the disciples were not at the foot of the cross. (The possible exception was the disciple Jesus loved, to whom the traditional third words from the cross – “Behold your mother!” – are addressed – no, probably not John, but Lazarus, but that's a whole 'nother story – but it is also a whole 'nother tradition.) We are told that various of Jesus' women followers were present – but only “from a distance”, too far to have heard these words (Matt 27:55-6a). It is unlikely, as some have proposed, that the source is the centurion who is recorded as having confessed “Truly, this man was a son of God” (Matthew 27:54), or, as Luke has it, “This man was innocent” (Luke 23:47); even if he was a historical character, he was not likely to have been calmly recording the condemned criminals' words at a public execution. Rather, noting that most of the traditional 'words from the cross' in the synoptic tradition are elaborations of Psalm 22, I fear we must relegate them to the category of pious literary creations, designed to emphasize the divinity of Jesus. Yes, we can say – as church tradition has – that the Holy Spirit was kind enough to provide us with a Psalm that no one really understood until it was fulfilled, like a prophecy, in the events of the crucifixion – but frankly, that is a stretch. I think the scenes around the cross are legendary, mythical if you prefer – but that is not to say that they are false; they express important, everlasting truths, about God and about mankind, even if supposedly addressed to only one person, at one moment.

These particular words are also problematic for us today in a way that they would not have been for the earliest Christians. These words from the cross assume the traditional arrangement of the universe, a three storey affair with hell in the basement, and heaven up in the attic. Since the Copernican revolution, the flat earth and three-storey universe (or eight-storey universe, as one pleased) have gone into the waste basket of intellectual history. The progression of science – and in particular modern telescopes that have made it possible to look far beyond our galaxy – have forced us to keep moving the attic farther and farther out, until today we Western Christians have largely given up with the idea that paradise is a place, and instead think of it as a spiritual state of being – but that is far from what those who first heard this passage would have conceived.

But either way, there is the next problem: was Jesus in paradise “today” – that is to say, immediately after his death and the death of the condemned criminal on the cross next to his? Ancient tradition has it – with the aid of one Scriptural reference, in I Peter 3:19 – that between his death and resurrection Jesus descended into hell for the “harrowing of hell”, to redeem those pious Old Testament characters who until his sacrificial death had been unable to enter paradise; not many contemporary Christians even know that reference, although it is – or was – important enough that it made it into the Apostles' Creed: “He descended into hell”. Not to mention all of the appearances that Jesus is recorded as making between his resurrection and ascension. Now, in both cases, one can argue theologically that as Jesus was one with God, He was present in paradise all of the time

that he was present on earth – or in Hell, for that matter – and that there is no contradiction in this, but all this does make it painfully obvious that not all Christians in the earliest Church were singing from the same song sheet, even if we can wallpaper over the cracks today.

But there is one huge crack that gapes under our theological wallpaper job, and that is the direct contradiction between the image we have in these words from the cross (and the imagery in the book of Revelations, of the saints, elders and martyrs (at least) surrounding the throne of God in heaven, plus the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which has an entirely different purpose – namely to teach about charity – and need not, and should not, be considered an authoritative teaching on resurrection and judgement) of people going to heaven upon their death, and the explicit instruction of Paul, to the Thessalonians, that after death we “sleep in Christ” until the general resurrection and Last Judgement.

This also – like “descended into hell” – falls into the category of things we confess in the Apostles' Creed, but don't believe. Just a few minutes ago, as we said the Apostles' Creed together, we made two affirmations, the first at the end of the second section, the second at the end of the third section: we said that we believe that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead – that is, we believe in a general, final judgement – and seconds later, we said that we believe in the resurrection of the body. These two points are closely intertwined, so much so that they basically stand or fall together. The general idea is that at the end of time there will be a physical resurrection – the earth and sea will give up their dead, and those who are still alive will be joined by those who have died, in a new “resurrection body”. St. Paul, in I Corinthians 15:35-9, groping for metaphors, vaguely tells us will have something of the relation to the old physical body that a new plant has to the seed that was planted: something which in that day was a good deal less precise than we think today, now that we know that there is DNA which connects the acorn and the oak tree, or the grain of corn and the corn stalk. The dead, and those still alive, will come together before the returning Christ for a general judgement, along the lines of the scene painted at the end of the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-ff), with the sheep and the goats – who will each be sent off to their ultimate fate, for better or worse, to suffer or enjoy their reward in some sort of in-bodied, physical form. As for what happens between the moment of our individual death and the general resurrection, that was a question which was being asked early-on, and which Paul felt obliged to try to answer in his first letter to the Thessalonians, where he again makes use of a metaphor – what has come to be called “soul sleep”: you will be as though you are asleep between your death and the general resurrection – in other words, very much somewhere, in being, but unaware of what is going on in the meantime.

This is all very much anchored in scripture. These beliefs are also anchored in the Jewish tradition from which the Church grew. Traditionally, Jewish anthropology was strongly unitary in its view of man: any one of us as a person was not a two-ply construction of body and soul glued together, but a unitary being: a life-force (NOT a pre-existent, personal soul) from God in a body, or an animated body. For the Old Testament Jew, as there wasn't a “soul” which was the essence of our being to go anywhere, when this life-force left the body, a person ceased to exist as a person, period – except as one might be remembered, by one's children, or by God. That is why having children to perpetuate one's memory is so important – for instance, why Job's loss of his children means such a total doom for him, or why the instruction in the Apocrypha, “let us now praise famous men”, is so important for the community. Without that remembrance, one's already shadowy existence as – to use a modern visual communications metaphor – as an “after-image” in Sheol fades into nothingness. But there were already voices raising questions about that after the Exile, and by the time of Jesus most of Judaism – aside from the ultra-

conservative Sadducees – had adopted a Persian idea that there would be a physical resurrection. Jesus' response to the Sadducees who needle him about this with the question of the woman married seven times shows he, and his followers, were firmly with the Pharisees on this issue. So: the idea of a general, physical resurrection and final judgement would seem pretty firmly anchored in Scripture and tradition.

The problem is, I doubt that there is anybody here today (aside from myself, who likes to cause trouble) who believes it.

This problem started on the other side of the Mediterranean, about the same time the Jews were learning about resurrection from the Persians: namely with the Greeks, and a guy named Plato. The Greeks believed – and Plato codified the idea – that the real world was not this physical one, but an ideal, spiritual world, of which this world was only a poor reflection – Plato's famous image of the cave in which we sit miserably in the dark, while shadows of the bright, real world outside flicker on the cave walls. The Greek anthropology which went with this said "we" are not unified persons, but spirits or souls, the "real" us, for that ideal, spiritual world from which we perhaps came, and to which we certainly aspire to go, and is more real than what foolish materialists call "reality". We are spirits or souls trapped in these ghastly bodies, in this ghastly world. Our calling is to get out of this awful world where we encounter pain and evil, get sick, age and die – in other words, get rid of this awful body – and return to the ideal spiritual world. The "mystery" of the mystery religions, the gnosis of the gnostic cults, all came down to that, basically: the news that you've got a bit of God, or a bit of the eternal, in you – and by recognizing that, you can make life bearable here until you find the exit!

Now, the church may well have won in the battle with the outright Gnostics – but it lost the war with Greek thought, which is why, for the past 1500 years, nobody has believed the two parts of the Apostles' Creed we are looking at today. Think for a moment about what you believe – and I suspect you will find that you believe not in the resurrection of the body, but in the immortality of the soul, and not in the general resurrection and judgement, but in an individual judgement at death. If we are good people – or at least good Protestants – at the moment of death we are somehow judged and we – that is, our soul, which is the real "us" – goes to be with Jesus – immediately. I mean, how do we comfort the relatives of a deceased person? Not with Paul's words about sleeping in the Lord, you may be sure: but with the affirmation that their beloved is with Jesus, or God! (I remember, back when my mother died, quite deliberately setting out to annoy those whom I wanted to challenge theologically, by responding to their words "Your mother is with the Lord now" by saying, "No, she isn't" - and after a fraction of a second adding, "I'm sure she is sleeping in the Lord, and I'm awaiting the resurrection too!") Now, if we are not good Protestants, but Catholics, after a brief appearance in court chances are – unless we are saints – we are sent to Purgatory, where we can expiate our sins, with a little help from our friends still here, to be ready for a further judgement. The whole of Roman thought on this issue, with its purgatory and limbos, is also based on the idea of immortal souls and immediate, individual judgement. And if we are really bad people, well, it's off to hell right away: there is certainly no spiritual rest for the wicked! Or, as an example of what we really believe, think, if you wish, of all those jokes which begin with "X died and went to heaven. At the Pearly Gates St. Peter said... and X said...". No soul sleep and final judgement there either.

At least the idea of Purgatory sort of supposes that there will be some sort of further court appearance – maybe in the form of the general judgement. But, at least for good Protestants and bad people, really, the judgement has already happened, at death. In fact, if you are an evangelical Protestant, with the rapture you've even had a chance to sit on

the clouds and sneer at all the liberal Christians and homosexuals and abortionists and heathens being tormented on earth during the Millennium. The book is closed; why do we need to get everybody back together for a second judgement? And as for resurrection of the body, the good folks are already in paradise with the Lord as souls: what use is a body? What would it add, even as a "resurrection body"? It is superfluous.

I suspect if challenged, most Christians would dutifully insist they believe in *both* the immortality of the soul, which isn't in the Creed, and the resurrection of the body, because it is, and in *both* individual judgement at the moment of death, and a big final scene. I further suspect that they would accept there are logical inconsistencies between the two beliefs in each case; they would just shrug their shoulders and say they are not theologians. What they would not do is question their prevailing belief about pre-existent, immortal souls and individual judgement, in light of scriptural and traditional authority; at best, they make room for resurrection of the body and general judgement with a nod to that authority.

Now, I haven't brought all this up just to "stick the dragon" with inconsistencies in Christian theology. I would commend to you a whole radically different way of looking at these words, the approach that C.S. Lewis takes in his book *The Great Divorce*. In the key passage in the book, the personage of George MacDonald, an early fantasy author and evangelical pastor, who Lewis's alter ego character encounters on his Dantean tour of heaven and hell, tells Lewis, "All this earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved. .. All their life on earth will be seen by the damned to have been Hell. That is what mortals misunderstand... not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. Both processes begin even before death. The good man's past begins to change, so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of heaven; the bad man's past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness. And that is why, at the end of things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there, the Blessed will say, 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly."

In short, for the dying thief on the cross, he has at that moment entered Paradise. Not just *today*, in the sense of later today, when he and Jesus have both died, but *today*, at that very moment, *right there on the cross*. And how and why has he done so? Not even by a formal confession that the man on the cross next to his was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. Rather, he has done so by his unselfish protest, in the midst of how own suffering at that moment, showing compassion and concern for the man on the cross next to his. By breaking with the selfishness of his life of violence up to that moment, he has crossed the threshold of Paradise, crossed the Great Divide, and all his life retrospectively has become God's work with him to bring him to that point to set him right with God, and with his fellow man. In the light of that moment, all his life, including his sins, the ways he has wronged others, become the presence of God in his life – and what is Paradise, other than life in the presence of God? Perhaps, in the line of MacDonald's words in the *Great Divorce*, that presence will be more perfect, or more perfectly understood, or more perfectly realized, when fully grown, but it is already a reality, from the moment when we first make that crucial turn away from self-centeredness and toward our fellow beings, toward their lives and sufferings. It is at that moment that we can begin to see the hand of God in all that we have done, in all we have encountered, working through all we have – and are – suffering.

The thief on the cross was fortunate enough to have Jesus Christ right there on the cross

next to him, so that his act of mercy, his unselfish confession, was made directly, and not via “the least of these my brethren”. And he was fortunate enough to have Jesus Christ on the cross next to him to receive this assurance that he had indeed made that crucial step into Paradise. But thanks to the incarnation, the Christ is still on the cross next to ours, in the persons of “the least of these”, and the choice is ever before us – the opportunity to live with and for others – the choice of entering Paradise, now.