

Good Friday
Luke 23: 39-43
April 2, 2010

Dearly loved and forgiven criminals!

We know these words. But we need to apply them.

On the cross, Jesus was earning the forgiveness of all our sins. On the cross, Jesus was winning forgiveness for all the sins of the whole world of all time. As far as Jesus' work is concerned, both criminals on the crosses had forgiveness available, from Jesus. So did all those people standing around the cross, not only Mary and John and a few other believers in Jesus as the Savior, but also those hateful, mocking chief priest, Pharisees and elders, and also those Roman soldiers, and also the people streaming into the city of Jerusalem who maybe only glanced over at this scene with the three crosses, and also everybody in the world that day who were totally unaware of any of these events, and also all the people yet to be born, like us.

That day, Jesus was also working at bringing the Good News of forgiveness and everything else forgiveness includes – like reconciliation of the sinners with the Holy God – to sinners. Jesus was coming to and actively, loudly knocking, with His voice, on many hearts.

There were three crosses. It's astonishing that the cross in the center held the One not at all guilty of anything. We could never tell, even if we had been among those physically standing there that day that Jesus was not guilty of anything worthy of the death sentence, not guilty of anything worthy of any Jewish or Roman justice. Scripture, the Word of God, is what clearly tells us Jesus never once sinned in any way. Jesus wasn't guilty of any sin at all!

But our Lord would die on that cross and death is the wage sin pays. Jesus was appropriately the centerpiece of this crucifixion because all sin was on Him. He was the whole of humanity's stand-in.

And our Savior was capable of doing that because He is God, The Son of the Father. Only infinite, almighty God could carry a load like that.

Jesus was actually offering His gift of forgiveness and life that day in addition to earning it.

Jesus was/is making the journey to human hearts. Jesus was/is making the effort of knocking on human hearts. It is the Book of Revelation that shows this picture of Jesus coming to and knocking on human hearts. It's interesting that in its context, this picture is offered to a Christian congregation with some members in need of repentance.

But the picture works for Jesus' efforts to reach out to any unbeliever, like these two criminals.

Revelation also tells us that the picture of Jesus knocking is a picture of Jesus' coming to people in and by His Word. Revelation says the sound is actually Jesus' voice (His Word).

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation!

There was lots of Gospel proclamation going on at this crucifixion scene. The criminals got to hear Jesus say right off, "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing." Those words did not only give people a very big benefit of the doubt, but they offered mercy.

At one of the Wednesday worship services, we noticed how Jesus' enemies preached lots of Gospel. In their mockery, they said things like – "He is the King of Israel." "He saved others." "He said, 'I am the Son of God, the Blessed One.'" Jesus did do and say all those things.

Were these two criminals Jewish? Probably! They were at Jerusalem, after all. And they were not Roman citizens because, according to Roman law, Roman citizens could not be crucified. If they were Jewish, it is highly likely that, as children, they had heard the Old Testament Scriptures.

Now, here they were on crosses, and as one of them openly confessed on this day, they were getting what their deeds deserved. They had earned capital punishment.

Can we make personal application here? Has Christ in fact pounded roughly on our hearts with His Law? A Lenten song I have sung a few times refers to us as felons at large. Felons!! That's another word for criminals, isn't it? Yes, indeed! Maybe we are not criminals of the state, but in God's court, the holy, perfect, righteous, good, sinless God's court, we all are convicted law breakers, felons, criminals!

This is what all of us are by nature, born sinners, felons, fully deserving of death. Crime does pay, but the pay is terrible. It is death. And one day, it will be our turn to die.

One of the criminals that day felt the accusations of God's law, and he knew it was his day to die. Every human heart knows the basics of God's law and every conscience has painfully testified against its owner with guilty feelings, an awful feeling.

The Gospel of Jesus also came knocking that day. The power of Jesus' merciful, loving, gracious Gospel not only came to that criminal, not only assaulted his heart, but made it alive, opened it up and went in. God's Word does that. God's power does that. God does that. He makes sinners able and willing to open up.

And the man confessed his guilt and that he deserved God's punishment, temporal and eternal, confessed his faith in Jesus, reached out to his fellow criminal, trying to share God's truth with him, too and prayed to Jesus for Jesus' mercy to remember him that day when Jesus, as King, entered His kingdom. And Jesus promised that man that on that day he would be with Jesus in that kingdom, which Jesus called paradise.

That's what forgiveness is! That's how it works!

God names us sinners, too. God, for Jesus' sake, brings forgiveness to us by His almighty Word, the Word that once created the universe; the Word that is able to re-create us, as it re-created this criminal in the nick of time, just before death came.

With Jesus, death leads into heaven (paradise). Without Jesus, death becomes eternal punishment for sin. Through His Word, Jesus is knocking at our hearts! Amen.