

Communion Service - Sunday 10th March Evening Service

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Date: 10 March 2019

Preacher: Rev Malcolm Maclean

- [0 : 00] We can turn back to the passage we read in Luke chapter 23. And we can read again at verse 42.
- And he said, it's a criminal. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.
- And he said to him, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. I suppose if somebody had said to the condemned criminal, at the moment he was condemned, that two thousand years later, and a few hundred miles from his location, that people would be singing about him.
- He'd have regarded that as impossible. But there we were, singing about him. The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day.
- And there may I, as byless he, wash all my sins away. Extraordinary, isn't it? That someone who was justly condemned should become the theme of songs of millions of people since then.
- [1 : 59] So I just want us to think about him. And see what we can learn from him. I don't know if you agree with the sentiment of Bishop Ryle.
- In one of his books, he's got a chapter called Christ's Greatest Convert. And if you read the chapter title, you might say to yourself, I wonder who that is.
- And when you look the chapter up, you find it's the dying thief. That's a long time since I read the chapter.
- So I can't recall the reasons why Ryle thought he was Christ's greatest convert. But there are features in his experience that are totally unique to him.
- I mean, he's the only believer that was beside Jesus when Jesus died. And that in itself gives him a place of real importance.
- [3 : 16] I mean, if in heaven we want to ask somebody what it's like to be at the cross. Well, he's the man.
- Because he was there for all of it. And he was right at the heart of it. And everything that took place.
- Just want to ask a couple of questions. The first one is, who was he? Or what kind of man was he? And then secondly, what he'd have felt like when he came to the cross.
- To his cross. And then, what he discovered at Calvary. That has made him such an inspiration. For millions of people.
- So who was he? Well, he wasn't an everyday criminal. If there is such a person.
- [4 : 25] Nor was he really a thief. Although he might have stolen plenty of things. The man in the center cross.
- Or the one who should have been there. Barabbas. That was this man's leader. And Barabbas.

Was a revolutionary. He was an individual. Determined. To overthrow the Roman Empire. Barabbas.

And. In ways that he didn't expect. He discovered that he was set free. But his colleagues. Didn't share. In such good fortune. And. Two of them. Were. Condemned.

[5 : 27] Along with Barabbas. And. The two of them. Went to the cross. So here's a. A man. Who to. Some people. Would have been a hero. He's actually. Fighting for the liberation. Of his race.

Jesus. But of course. To the Roman authorities. He was a criminal. And. Whatever they had done.

In the. In the. Hours before they were arrested. We are told that they had committed murder. In the. So.

[6 : 23] In all probability. It was some soldiers. That they had. Assassinated. In some form. And. They chose the. Best time. To have their. Attempted. Revolution. Because. The. The Passover. Well.

It was an. Occasion. For celebrating. A previous deliverance. When. Moses. Had led. The children of Israel. Out of. Bondage. To the. Most powerful.

Empire. At the time. The Egyptian Empire. And no doubt. These people. Might have thought. Well. It happened in the past. It can happen again. And. There's all these.

Millions. A million Jews. Apparently. Who go out to Jerusalem. Every year. To keep the Passover. And. There. They're there. And if they. Follow us. Then.

We will. Have our. Triumph. But that's not the way. Things worked out. Instead. They were arrested. But that's who he was. It's not a.

[7 : 19] Common criminal. Really. He's actually. A. Very different. Type. Of person. So what would we like.

When he came. To the cross. To his cross. Now. We can say. He was a very. Driven man. Can't we. This man. Had ambition. His. He had. Great ambition. I mean.

Imagine. Imagine. Imagine. Imagine. Someone. Trying. To overthrow. America. Or overthrow. Russia. That's what. This man. Was trying to do. A way back.

In his time. He was a. His aim. Was to get rid. Of the Roman Empire. An empire. That stretched. Halfway around the world. God. And. He was devoted.

[8 : 14] To doing this. He was a. A very. Driven man. He would go to great lengths. To bring it about. He wasn't just. Content to. As it were. To sit back. And dream about it.

He was willing to. Do what he could. To bring. This. Aim. That he had. So he's a very. Driven character.

And I think. We can read that. In what he says. At the cross. Because. At the cross. We see aspects.

Of his outlook. Coming out. And we'll think about them. Later on. So he's a very. Driven man. At the same time.

He'd be a very. Disappointed man. Wouldn't he? As I suggested. He had high hopes. No doubt. He expected.

[9 : 09] All these. Jews. Who are up. From all over the world. To keep the Passover. He expected them. To rally. To Barabbas. At 10. But.

Every way it happened. The Romans. Were able to. To curb. The attempt. And. It was finished. Here he was. Hanging on the cross. His hopes. Had been dashed.

He's a very. Disappointed man. When we think about. Him being. A driven man. Well. Surely. We. Say to ourselves.

People. Who are driven. Can find answers. At the cross. When what they are. Focused on. Doesn't happen. And people.

Who are disappointed. Whatever their dreams were. They find the answer. At the cross. The same as this man. Eventually did.

[10 : 09] In addition. In addition. In addition. To being driven. And being. Disappointed. We can also see.

He was defiant. I mean. There is. There is. Jesus. The most beautiful man. Who ever lived.

But. From the point of view. Of this. Revolutionary. At that particular moment. Jesus.

Message. Was the totally opposite. Of what he wanted. he wanted to overthrow Rome Jesus in contrast to him preached a message of peace in which he even as they arrived at the cross these two men they heard Jesus say something and instead of showing animosity towards the Romans who were crucifying him Jesus prayed for them Father forgive them for they know not what they do and these two criminals heard that and as they listened to Jesus make that incredible prayer a prayer that reveals his love they despised him they mocked him for these two men who these two men thought was a saviour initially is Barabbas he's the man who's going to rescue us and as for Jesus what does his message of forgiveness bring about and there on the cross this driven man this disappointed man is a defiant man and he looks Jesus in the face and despises him with all his heart he mocks him he mocks him derides him

I suppose if we were a neutral which we cannot be but we would say to ourselves which of the two options are going to win the political revolutionary or the prince of peace and we can see at this man well for him to become Christ's greatest convert something very radical has to happen and we see that something did because all of a sudden he changes his tune and we might say well he changes his tune when things seem almost ridiculous because all of a sudden they are down in verse 39 and 40 verse 40 he responds to his former colleague as the his friend derides Jesus and says to him tauntingly are you not the Christ save yourself and us

[14 : 17] I mean it all depends who says words we could say these words to somebody and mean them but here's a a man about to die and he says to Jesus save yourself and us but they are words of contempt but his friend who previously had been deriding Jesus now changes his words completely and we know the answer to what's happened here that in an amazing way the Holy Spirit has shown to this revolutionary that the real power lies in this man who's hanging beside him and he just turns to the his former colleague and says and rebukes him and says to him do you not fear God since we are indeed under the same sentence of condemnation

I mean the man's a Jew he understands that sooner or later he's going to face God and face God's judgment and however long people could survive on the cross and sometimes they could live for two or three days eventually his life is going to come to an end and he knows when that moment comes that he's going to be facing God's judgment and when he comes to stand before God's judgment all his efforts to recover some political dream are not going to do him any good at all as he stands there before God and he just says to his former friend and he's not deriding his friend when he says it he just points out to them and says do you not fear God there's only one place you're going to from this cross and the place you're going to is the place of judgment it's the only thing that's guaranteed to happen and then he points out in addition to challenging his friend he confesses confesses his own sin we indeed justly for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds an extraordinary way of a revolutionary looking at his previous behavior all these efforts he has made to try and recapture their national greatness he just says about it we are getting the due reward for our deeds he says to his friend when you and I did what we did in the last few days they did not please heaven and we deserve to be here on the cross for our actions and then he turns and points to Jesus and says to his friend this man this man who I was deriding a few minutes ago this man has done nothing wrong he doesn't mean that this man hasn't done anything outrageous instead he says this man has never done anything wrong that throughout his entire life he's done nothing wrong how did he know that and why is that detail stressed here why should a convicted criminal all of a sudden start to speak about the perfection of Christ's life and why should Luke record it for us so that when people read it they discover that there's something important about the innocence of the life of

Jesus it was Passover time and maybe this man realized that the what Jesus was doing that he was fulfilling the Passover lamb we don't know that maybe that's what he was doing and he would have been aware as a Jew that the Passover lamb had to be flawless if there was the slightest spot in it it was no use as a sacrifice and it would not be too difficult for him to move from that to saying well if that's true of the animal that's used in the ritual and here as a

Jew he probably knew Isaiah 53 and he would have remembered with the lamb being led to the slaughter and the one who was dumb before his shearers and as he looked at Jesus hanging there in his state of utter weakness maybe it dawned on this man this is the one that the prophet spoke about this is the one who's going to be flawless and sinless and Luke tells us that at the time when Jesus died this individual stood up and testified to the perfection of his life and that of course is a very crucial part of the

Christian message it's not enough that our saviour died for us we need a saviour who also lived for us when you and I get to the judgment seat God is going to ask us two things he's going to say to us how did you treat my commandments what's your obedience like because you're meant to give me says God a life of total obedience and God never takes away that requirement and in addition to that

[22 : 31] I am going to have and you as well are going to have to give to God the payment for our sins so when we stand there in the day of judgment like this criminal we're going to need a perfect life and we are going to need an atoning death and where are we going to get them because we can't give either I can't give to God a life of obedience nor can I give to God any payment for any of my sins but I need someone who can and someone who did and if the dying thief had known it he would have joined in the verse that

Boner wrote upon a life I did not live upon a death I did not die another's life another's death I rest my whole eternity when God says to us where is your life of obedience we just point to Jesus and we say he lived a perfect life and part of that perfect life included him behaving perfectly on the cross his perfect life didn't stop when he was nailed to the tree but how he responded after being nailed to the tree was necessary for his perfect life and if we had been standing there with this criminal and we heard

Jesus say father forgive them for they don't know what they're doing we would say to ourselves that's perfect what else should he have said if he's the perfect one and instead of taunting him for his weakness we would admire him for his perfection and everything else he did on the cross is just the crowning of his perfect life and he's not just doing it for himself but he's doing it for everyone that would trust in him including this criminal beside him and this man grasps that doesn't he he's saying to his friend you and

I need someone who never sinned what amazing insight he had as he gazed at a battered body hanging on the cross the body of Jesus and because of that he became a delivered man he just said to Jesus there in verse 42 42 Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom where did he get that from in all probability he had never seen

Jesus before but if you realize that the person hanging there is the perfect man man then you are bound to look at what is said about him aren't you and what was said about him what's written above his head because that's the only information this man has got apart from the fact that he now knows the one hanging there is a perfect man and written above the head of Jesus is his name Pilate put it there written there is Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jews this man this criminal had spent his entire life looking for the king of the

[27 : 47] Jews he's looking for someone that's going to set them free he doesn't know when he's going to do it but he knows when the king comes that's what's going to happen and as he looks at the one he now regards as the perfect man he says your name is Jesus so that's what I'll call you and it tells me you're a king and I don't know when your kingdom's coming but when it does come remember me he discovered or realized that this suffering man with a future kingdom was approachable as he was hanging there on the cross we can say about this criminal that he used the information that he was given and he used that information to speak to

Jesus what do we do with the information we have because we know so much more in comparison to him all he had was these two little details his name and the fact he was going to have a kingdom somewhere and he used that to speak to Jesus you and I as I just said we know a lot more than that but what's the point of knowing it if we don't talk to Jesus about it it doesn't do us any good if we don't talk to him about it I'm sure that most of us have been very familiar with all the details about

Jesus and we know far more than two things but unless we speak to him about them our knowledge doesn't do us any good and we should copy this mask we can even take his prayer and even the words that he uses they can mean far more to us than he ever did to him when he first uttered them and we can just say to Jesus on behalf of ourselves Jesus remember me now that you're a king but this man did that and that simple straightforward request brought him immediate deliverance didn't get him off the cross which was the trivial thing he was asking for a few minutes earlier but what it did get to him was a promise of being in heaven which was of far more importance than being rescued from suffering for a few years

Jesus just said to him there truly I say to you today you'll be with me in paradise and of course we can see in that statement that Jesus knew where he was going he also knew how long it would take him to get there the Jewish day finished at 6 p.m it's now noon within six hours both Jesus and this man are going to be in paradise what an extraordinary statement it's not that some vague time in the future perhaps even tomorrow that we'll be in paradise but today in the day that's got six hours left in it within that time

Jesus says to him you and I will be together in paradise what a beautiful picture of heaven isn't it paradise a garden place of beauty a place of rest a place of joy a place of happiness looking back to Eden when Jesus spoke of paradise he knew what he was speaking about he didn't have to dream of pictures about what the garden looked like he was the one who had made it way back in the beginning and he saying to this man he's using the best possible picture of heaven paradise and saying to this man you're hanging there in agony in this ugly location within six hours you and

[34 : 31] I will be in the place of bliss and I am sure that there was great comfort in his heart as he heard that he's got six hours to go what's going to happen in these six hours what's this man going to go through when he's now a disciple what do disciples go through is he going to be spared something because he's only got six hours to go so what happened to him

Luke tells us he went through an incredible time of darkness this one that he was speaking to at noon all of a sudden as they were perhaps just finishing their conversation it all went dark and although it's not very easy for him to see what's going on he can sense that the one hanging beside him is going through some kind of turmoil a turmoil that's going to reach its strength three hours later when this man who said to him today you'll be with me in paradise now turns to

God and says why have you forsaken me what did this new disciple have to go on as the one he had trusted in the one he had affirmed has lived a perfect life what's this former criminal got to rely on as he faces this darkness well you can only go on the promise can't you even although it's been dark for three hours he can only go on the promise that within six hours he's going to be in paradise with Jesus and since this perfect man never tells a lie there's no contradiction between the promise that the criminal will be in heaven and the sense of being abandoned that

Jesus is expressing maybe the man realised that somehow this darkness that Jesus was going through was because of all these deeds that this former revolutionary had been doing as he tried to get freedom for his people but whatever it was like all disciples he went through a time of darkness in which there was a situation that he couldn't explain and all he could do in the darkness was trust the words of the one who had suffered there beside him and then as a disciple he met new converts what new converts did he meet at

Calvary how can he possibly meet new converts at the cross and who are they going to be well the extraordinary thing is that the new converts there in verse 44 42 are his former enemies the Roman soldiers who had arrested him and who had nailed him to the cross who had also nailed Jesus to the cross here they are the centurion and his four men Luke tells us that the centurion praised God and certain this man was innocent and Matthew tells us that they all praised God and we can imagine this former criminal who's discovered who Jesus is and there at his feet are five soldiers who've discovered who Jesus is as a disciple he's met new disciples

[40 : 48] I mean that is what happens to disciples that's the story of their experience and that's what happened to this man and maybe just maybe because we don't know when he died but maybe he lived long enough to see two prominent Jewish citizens making their way to the cross Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and he sees these ones who again he would have thought little of previously because members of the Sanhedrin well they were just conformists but here they are and these two who had kind of sat on the fence before and not fully come out for

Jesus here this soldier he's still alive sees them coming and at the cross taking down the battered body are these two prominent citizens and if the soldier sorry if the criminal was still alive what a strange conversation between him and the five soldiers and these two prominent Jewish leaders I suppose we do have to ask ourselves how do we know what happened at the cross who has told us all the details of

Cal wasn't the disciples because they had run away it wasn't the women because they're too far away how do we know that this man made his prayer he didn't live to announce it in the city the next day he had to tell someone who then told someone and eventually it got to Luke and we have it here this gospel and I suspect that when Joseph and Nicodemus came to the cross that day and discovered five praising soldiers and one converted criminal they just told the story and repeated it and now it's recorded for us as we close he died he lived as a disciple for a very short time but what a powerful testimony he has said you know none of us can possibly know what

God can do with our story what's important is that people hear it if people don't know our story how can they know us and it's our responsibility to tell them just as this man must have done he died unnoticed on earth didn't he he'd have been taken down off the cross at some stage and what normally happened to the bodies they were just thrown on the rubbish dump and that's probably what happened to him but long before his body was thrown into the rubbish dump he had entered heaven and when he got to heaven he was welcomed there by

Jesus and the Jesus who welcomed them into heaven will take care of his body and still die just close with this I remember years ago reading a sermon by Spurgeon on the dying thief and Spurgeon in his own way imagined the arrival of the thief in heaven or the criminal in heaven and he pictured the angels anticipating the arrival and often saying to one another I wonder what great person is going to come in after Jesus and in comes this man and Spurgeon has the angels turning to

[46 : 44] Jesus and saying who's this and the answer they got a sample of them all because none of us deserve to get there and if we do want to get to him we have to take our place beside this man and no matter how much we would abhor his action we have to take our place beside him and say with him Lord remember us when you come to your care and if we do that we'll reach the same destination as he has been enjoying for two thousand years so may God bless these thoughts to us come to him version and we are serving all to him

He he has shot together