

## Sermon 20 November 2022

### Luke 23:33-43

The story of the criminal hanging on the cross near Jesus, calling out to Jesus and Jesus replying, *'Today you will be in paradise with me,'* is one of the meaningful little stories that occur in the life of Jesus. It's got to be the ultimate story of repentance and forgiveness. Let me tell you another story.

It is about a young person who grew up in a Catholic family in Ohio, USA. He was once quite active in the Church and even entered a seminary to study for the ministry. Then came the turmoil of the Vietnam years. Anti-war protests, as well as race riots, tore apart cities. Everything became unglued.

The young man left the seminary and even the church, joined the anti-war movement and began ridiculing the faith he once embraced. His family and friends were shocked. Then came Holy Week and Good Friday of 1970. The young man, now twenty-two years old, was driving past a Catholic church. He recognised the name of the priest on the sign in front of the church. It was a priest he had once respected very much.

Something prompted him to stop the car and go inside the church. As he walked through the door, the Good Friday service was just beginning. He watched as people filed up to reverence the cross while the choir sang, *'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'* Then something remarkable happened. I quote his very words, *'Something inside me snapped and I began to cry. Overcome with emotion, I remembered the peace I had felt years ago in church. The simple faith I was witnessing now seemed more meaningful than what I had been professing. I got out of my seat and went up to kiss the cross. The priest recognised me and came over to hug me. On that day, I became a born-again Catholic.'*

That young man reached out to Christ in his anguish, he was forgiven, embraced and his life turned, took on a new meaning. In a similar way, the thief hanging on the cross reached out to Jesus in his anguish, he was forgiven and his life was about to take a dramatic turn for the better, in fact, a whole new life with Christ in heaven.

So where do we fit into this narrative? Well, we might be not be thieves in the same vein as he who was hanging in the cross, but we do carry the weight of our mistakes and our faults. We are human and we do let both ourselves and God down at times, but the good news is that despite that, God still wants us to put that behind us and reach out to him. If we can do that, we will be forgiven and the way is open for us to strengthen our relationship with him and with Christ.

I refer to our first reading in which Paul says, *'God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'* God wants to be part of our lives and do what he did for the seminarian and the thief. I love the contrast. It means that no matter who we are, no matter our iniquities and our faults, God wants to have a relationship with us, and when that materialises, he can do wonderful things for us.

I want to remind you of a story I told some time ago. It's a story that is so appropriate for today's message that I just have to tell it again.

The man who was Bishop of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris during the early part of last century was a great evangeliser. He tried to reach out to unbelievers and cynics. He liked to tell the story of a young man who would stand outside the cathedral and shout derogatory slogans at the people entering to worship. He called them fools and all kinds of names. The people tried to ignore him but it was difficult.

One day, the parish priest went outside to confront the young man, much to the distress of the parishioners. The young man ranted and raved against everything the priest told him. Finally, he said to the scoffer, 'Look, let's get this over with once and for all. I'm going to dare you to do something and I bet you can't do it.' And of course, the young man shot back, 'I can do anything you propose, you white-robed wimp!'

'Fine,' said the priest. 'All I ask you to do is to come with me into the sanctuary. I want you to stare at the figure of Christ and I want you to scream as loudly as you can, 'Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit.'

So the young man went into the sanctuary and, looking at the figure of Christ, screamed as loud as he could, 'Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit.' The priest said, 'Very good. Now do it again.' And again, the young man screamed, with a little hesitancy, 'Christ died on the cross for me and I don't care one bit.' 'You're almost done now,' said the priest. 'Now one more time.'

The young man raised his fist, kept looking at the figure of Christ, but the words wouldn't come. He just could not look at the face of Christ and say that any more.

The real punchline came when, after he told the story, the bishop said, 'I was that young man. That young man, that defiant young man was me. I thought I didn't need God, but found out that I did.'

Rev Warner Wilder