

## "A WORD OF PROMISE"

TEXT: "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be  
with me in paradise" Luke 23:43

### INTRODUCTION

These words were uttered by our Lord from the cross. We often refer to them as "the second word" of seven words spoken by Jesus as He was going through the agony of being put to death on the cross. This second word was an answer to a prayer. It was an answer addressed to a single individual.....to a thief who was being crucified along with Him. Our Lord spoke to this man as if he were the only human being in the world, and what a satisfying answer he gave! What a strong staff He put into the hand of a dying man. What comfort those words must have brought. And what comfort those words have brought to countless needy souls since that day! Of the seven words spoken from the cross by Jesus, none, I feel is more appealing and satisfying to our hearts than this:

"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be  
with me in paradise"

### WHO OFFERED THIS PRAYER THAT BROUGHT THIS ANSWER

Who was it that offered the prayer that  
brought this satisfying answer?

The man to whom Jesus spoke this word is one of the most striking personalities that we meet on the pages of the New Testament. He was not a thief in our sense of the word, but rather a revolutionist. He, with his companion, had belonged to the Jewish underground. Since they had not been able to organize armies and fight in the open, they had organized guerrilla bands and had sought to prey upon Rome as ruthlessly as they had felt that Rome had preyed upon them. Thus the man who offered the prayer that brought so rich an answer was a man of violence whose hands were deeply stained with the blood of human beings.

Now was it by accident that our Lord was nailed to the central cross between two outlaws. That, I think, was the final malicious act against Jesus on the part of his enemies. We can easily see the workings of their minds. With a kind of fiendish glee, they reminded themselves of the fact that throughout his ministry, Jesus had been a friend of sinners.....that he had often associated with the "undesirables" of the community. "All right" they sneered, "Since he has made sinners his companions in life, we will give him the privilege of dying with them". And so they nailed him to the central cross between two outlaws.

In a sense, Jesus and this man who spoke the prayer had certain in common. They were both ardent patriots. They were both men of great courage and action. Both had struggled toward a common goal. Both had sought to help their people. Jesus had done so to the end. The outlaw had doubtless done so until his career of violence brought him into a clash with the Roman authorities. They were also akin in that they had been willing to give themselves for the cause they held dear. In certain respects, they saw eye to eye.

However, on the other hand, they were also far apart. In seeking to save his nation, Jesus had refused to resort to violence. He had no faith in physical force. He had said to those who listened to him, "Resist not evil". He had declared that the man who took the sword would perish by the sword. He had said to his followers, "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth". To this revolutionist and to many other like him, such talk probably sounded like a lot of sentimental nonsense.. .completely absurd. He saw that Rome had inherited the earth, and Rome was not meek. The only way to meet force was with force, violence with violence. Thus with certain things in common, Jesus and this courageous revolutionist were far apart on other matters.

And it's interesting to note in passing in connection with this that even down to this day, we are by no means agreed as to who was right. The vast majority still lean in the direction of the man of violence. And yet the verdict of history is on the side of Jesus. He was sure that violence does not have the final answer. We recall how he beheld the city of Jerusalem and wept over it. And the sound of his sobbing comes to us across the centuries of time. Why did he weep? He wept because his people were blind to the things that make for peace. They were bent on winning by force and Jesus knew that that would in the end end in disaster. Twenty centuries later, we are still by no means convinced that the meek will inherit the earth. We have been forced to fear that if we do not cease to be violent, there will be no earth to inherit.

WHY DID THIS REVOLUTIONIST PRAY?      Suppose we consider a second question involved in this drama surrounding the cross? Why did this revolutionist pray?

Was he praying because he was frightened? Was he praying because he was seeking an easy way out of a hard situation. I hesitate to say that this was the reason. It was after this fashion that the lesser outlaw, the other outlaw had prayed. "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us". But there is nothing of this mere seeking to escape in the prayer of the greater outlaw. He asked not to be let off from suffering, but only to be remembered. "Jesus, remember me when Thou comest into thy kingdom". His hell, I feel, was in being what he was rather than in being where he was.

I should like to think that his prayer was the prayer of a penitent. Can we not say that in those moments he had a flash of reality, a vision of the true and ultimate reality of things. A moment of truth. And what did this vision, this flash of reality do to him. What did a vision of reality do for the youthful Isaiah? When he saw "the Lord...high and lifted up..." - he also saw himself. And having seen himself in the light of God's presence, he did not like what he saw. And therefore he became penitent and cried out, "Woe is me....I am a man of unclean lips".

Against the white background of the innocence of our Lord, this outlaw saw himself. And seeing himself in the presence of

our Lord, he could no longer feel the same way about himself. His prayer was the prayer of the penitent. And isn't it true that whenever there is a sense of God, whenever one really sees Jesus and the things for which he stood, there is always a sense of sin, a sense of unworthiness, a sense of the one's own inadequacies. Not only so, but the more vivid the vision of God, the more real the sense of sin.

LOOK AT THIS PRAYER

Suppose we look at the prayer, if you will of this repentant revolutionist.

His prayer was addressed to Jesus in whom he saw not simply a king, but The King. What marvellous insight he had. To be sure the kingship of Jesus for many that day was the central sarcasm of the moment. The priest of the Temple and others had accused Jesus before Pilate of being a pretender. It was this charge that brought about the condemnation. Pilate knew the charge to be false. He was therefore eager to set Jesus free. There were one or two bright moments when it looked like he might succeed. But finally someone shouted, "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend". And at that Pilate was hot and cold. He had to stand well with Caesar, cost what it might. Therefore he was afraid to release a man accused of being a pretender, even though he knew the accusation false.

When the underlings had seen that Jesus was condemned as a pretender, they took up the charge. The soldiers in their glee told themselves that a King must be properly dressed, so they put a scarlet robe on him. Kings must have scepters, so they put a reed in his hand. A king must have a crown, so they made him a crown of thorns. As a climax to the mockery, Pilate had placed this above his head, "This is Jesus - King of Jews".

But to the revolutionist being crucified next to Jesus, this Kingship was no joke. With matchless insight, this outlaw saw in the man who was dying at his side a King who could grant favors beyond death. He saw a man who was far greater than any earthly King, and so he prayed - "Jesus....remember me when Thou comest into thy kingdom". His prayer was a daring expression of faith. He did not pray, "Remember me IF thou comest in thy kingdom. But rather, "Remember when WHEN thou comest".

THE ANSWER

The prayer received an answer. It was an answer of assurance - a word of promise, and how it touches us and speaks to our needs:

"Verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in paradise".

Jesus was declaring the assurance that life goes on. There was no hesitancy in his voice....no uncertainty in his answer. No "ifs", "ands" and "buts"....no "maybe"....no "perhaps". "Today" he said, "Thou shalt be with me in paradise". As death cannot stop

me, neither can it stop you. He was declaring the assurance that life goes on...that the human personality survives the grave....

There are times when all of us need to be braced with the certainty of the on goingness of life, with the certainty of a homeland for the soul.

Take these words then and weave them into your own pattern of thought and understanding. Put them in that place where you keep the things that are most important... to be taken out and remembered in those moments of uncertainty and darkness...

"Verily I say unto thee....today thou shalt be with me in paradise....."

PRAYER God, our Father, we pause once again "beneath the cross of Jesus" confessing the wonders of redeeming love and our unworthiness....

We know, O God, that all things work together for good to them that love Thee. We know that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art always with us and that there is nothing to fear but the loss of thee.

We know that nothing can separate us from those we love and that in thy safe keeping they are free from danger and harm.

Knowing these things, O God, may we go quietly forward from day to day....not looking to far ahead.....taking each step with the assurance of the word of our Lord....who overcame death and brought life and immortality to light. In his name we pray Amen.