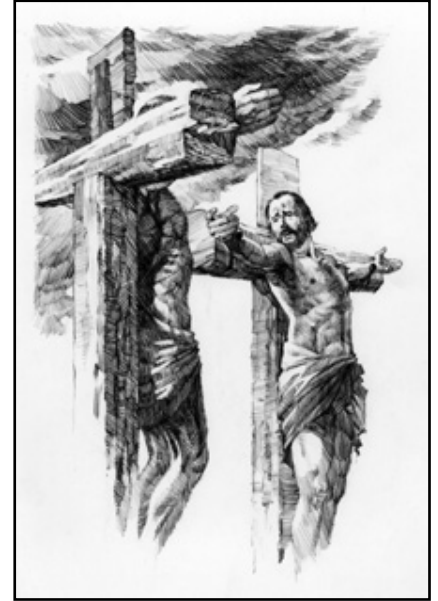


HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

Few men or women can ever have been in a more desperate situation than the two thieves who were publicly executed either side of Jesus 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem. Minutes away from an agonising death, jeered at by a crowd of blood-thirsty spectators, and even at this late stage, still cursing God. And yet within the space of a few minutes, the prospects and eternal destiny of one of these two men was to be transformeddramatically! For reasons that the Bible does not reveal, the one thief suddenly sees in the crucified Jesus the king who will conquer death, and someone whose mercy he desperately needs. And as he appeals to Jesus to remember him, the Son of God gives him a triple assurance.



First – he tells him that he was headed for “paradise”. He was guaranteed entry into everlasting, irreversible happiness.

Then – he was told that he would be “with” Jesus...the Jesus he had just minutes earlier been mocking and cursing.

Finally, he was told that all this would take place “today”. Not in another 2,000 years. Not after a spell in some non-existent purgatory. But the moment he died.

In other words, this man who had perhaps up to this moment had no interest in, or time for God, whose prospects were hopeless, finds himself looking forward to a future bursting with hope.

Does all this sound a bit “quaint”?

Well, for the best part of the last 2,000 years, this eternal dimension was smack in the centre of full-blooded, mainstream Christianity. Here is what kept sick, handicapped, persecuted, sinful Christians going. The fact that however difficult and even hopeless their earthly circumstances were, however serious their faults and misdemeanours had been, there was in the crucified but living Jesus, hope. The certainty that the moment their life on earth came to an end, there would be an immediate entry into heaven. No medical or moral questionnaire to fill in. Instead, as Jesus had taught in his parable of the labourers, the thief on the cross and all like him, could look forward to the same scale of reward as the man who had spent all his life obeying God. Why? Because all who make it to heaven, will be there not on the basis of what they have or haven't done, but because of what Christ has done and earned on their behalf.

What does it take then to inherit all this? What must I do? How can my eternal future be secured and transformed?

Well – the New Testament tells us of four ingredients in this thief's “conversion”.....



- He acknowledged his guilt and unworthiness – “We are receiving the due reward for our deeds”.
- He saw in Jesus the complete opposite – “This man has done nothing wrong”.
- He recognised in the crucified Christ, a royal dignity – “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”.
- He cried out for mercy – “Remember me!”

Do you consider yourself a lost cause? A desperate case? Someone beyond God's mercy? Then let the true story of this hopeless, helpless man be a source of hope to you. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” - Jesus once said. Or as I prefer to translate it – “Blessed are the bankrupt”. For theirs (and theirs alone) is the kingdom of heaven”.

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