

**They Met at the Cross: “The Thieves Who Died With Him”**  
Luke 23:32- 43 (NRSV)

**Jesus Christ didn’t die alone.** One cross always stands out in our memories and in the history of the world, but it wouldn’t have seemed like that to a casual spectator on the first Good Friday morning. Crucifixion was a common form of execution then. Any visitor to Jerusalem, passing the notorious Place of the Skull, on that never-forgotten-day, might have remarked, when he got to his lodgings within the city, “I saw three men crucified on that hill today.”

**Three men! Three crosses!** How similar they were in some ways, those three haunting, crucified figures – their agonizing bodies sagging on the pierced hands, the raging thirst that tortured them in the dust and the heat, the embarrassingly shameful naked spectacle for all to see! It was the same for all three!

**I wonder what led the rulers to crucify Jesus with the thieves?** Was it just “an accident” as some might say? Did the captain of the execution squad remark to his companions: “There are two others under sentence. Better make one job of it! Do all three of them together!” Or was it another refinement of cruelty thought out by Jesus’ enemies – a calculated detail added to heighten the shame; to stress, if they could, his criminal character? “A man is known by the company he keeps!” “Crucify him with the criminals! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

I do not know. But I know this. **Jesus Christ did not die alone.** There were **three figures on three crosses** that awful day on that awful hill. The crosses were the same, and the method of execution was the same – and yet how vast a difference there was among those three. Mark’s and Matthew’s Gospels tells us that the two on the other two crosses were “robbers” or “thieves” (Mk. 15:27; Matt. 27:38, 44). Luke says they were “criminals” (23:33, 39). John’s just describes them as “two others” (19:18). In any case, the picture is clear: these other two men deserved to die.

Of course, Jesus Christ was vastly different than these two criminals. But even among those criminals there is some distinction. In fact, if we look closer we will see that **there were three different figures on the cross.**

Let me say that I found it interesting, to say the least, when I visited our local **Matsqui Institution** on King Road many years ago to conduct a service for the convicts that were incarcerated there, to see that the mural that covered the entire front wall of the chapel was a powerful painting of this scene painted, no doubt, by the prisoners themselves. Why did they pick this picture of all the pictures available to them in the Holy Scriptures? Because this story still speaks volumes to any who may ponder its meaning.

### 1. **There was first, a figure of rebellion.**

I am thinking, of course, of **the criminal who derided Jesus Christ** in the hour of his dying. I wonder, as you may wonder, by what path he came to his cross? Did he come out of a bad home and learn to steal almost as soon as he learned to walk? Or did he come out of a good home, and did his mother dream dreams about him and pray that he might be good and great? Or were there bad companions who led him astray?

I don't know; but **I do know how wrong he was**. It appears he was coarsened and hardened in sin. He was no first offender. Maybe he'd already had his "three strikes" and found he was totally out of sync with society. Not even the solemnities of death could wipe the blasphemies from his lips. He could see Jesus, and hear him pray for his murderers' pardon, and look upon the weeping women at the foot of the cross, and catch the moan of his broken-hearted mother – and still spit out his foul aspersions. Mockingly, he declared, in a raucous and derisive voice, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Lk. 23:39). He was bitter, spurning some good deed that he might do even on the day of his own dying, and cursing his way to hell in the most solemn hour of all history. **His was a cross of rebellion**. His own comrade said of their condemnation that it was truly deserved (Lk. 23:40), but this rebel would not learn, even on the lip of the grave. He was dying with the Saviour and – wonder of wonders – he had the chance, even then, to change his cross to a crown. But he threw it away.

There are **people like that today**. They have a cross to bear, and the cross makes them more resentful, more bitter, than they ever were. It might be a punishment – as with the rebellious thief – or it might be an affliction that they can't help, or it might be a wrong cruelly done to them by another. But instead of wrestling it to the ground or at least to their good, they twist it to their greater loss.

**You and I know what sad experiences life throws at us.** But you and I also know how often we hold in our hands the impediments or the keys or to freedom and fullness of life. In his last conversation with his disciples in the upper room before he was crucified, Jesus said, “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you shall have trouble, but cheer up, take courage; I have conquered the world!” (Jn.16:33). He is our freedom and fullness and peace.

Is there anyone here today **crucified on a cross of rebellion** – twisting on the cross, as it were, and doubling its pain by missing its ministry? Remember that Jesus challenged those who wish to follow him “to take up their cross [whatever it may be] daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23; Matt.16:24; Mk. 8:34; 10:21). Are you one of those to who life has brought losses -- the heaviest, bitterest losses -- losses that leave your life forever different? Have you dealt with them, accepted them – or is it enmity with heaven still? Maybe you are just **“resigned”** to what life gives. I can be glad for that, but did you know that resignation is not a Christian grace? Always beneath resignation there is – let me put it bluntly – a **“pus-point” of rebellion** still surviving. Christians are not just resigned to the will of God, or even acquiescent to it, or merely conformed to it, but surrendered, totally abandoned to it. Having done your very best, having no regrets about having done what you can do, **are you abandoned to the will of God?**

A gospel song I used to sometimes sing, said, **“I surrender all, I surrender all; all to Jesus I surrender, I surrender all.”** It’s not one that is sung very much anymore. I wonder why. We don’t surrender much anymore. We want it all. And when we cannot have it all, then we might resign ourselves to the situation, but underneath there still will lurk a spirit of outrageous rebellion. But there is for the faithful Christian a point when there must be no more rebellion. The words, “Not my will, but yours, be done” were on the lips of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:42b). Not merely what God does, but what God allows, must win our willing acceptance. After all, it is God’s world, and God allows nothing in it or out of it through and by which he cannot bring some redemptive good.

## **2. The figure of repentance.**

I am thinking now, of course, of **the penitent criminal**. I wonder how he came to the cross. Had he had a good home? Who put a sense of compassion and concern into him? Was it during some tender years that his

father or mother, or later, that a pastor or friend spoke to him of love and decency which was still a sediment in his soul when he was suddenly selected for a minor role when our Lord died on Calvary? **I will love this bad man forever.** Think of this: the last, kind words spoken to our dying Lord, were spoken by this repentant criminal. He could have only had the vaguest idea what was happening beside him, but years and years in sin had not so much blunted his moral perception that he was incapable of recognizing **a good man.**

**Yet Jesus was no good man.** “Why do you call me good?” he once asked. “No one is good but God alone” (Lk. 18:19). Somehow, it moved in the half-fuddled brain of this felon, as he hung upon his cross, that **he had witnessed Someone who was not of this earth.** He had seen them nail this Nazarene onto the wood, watched the blood spurt, forethought his own immediate agony in beholding his writhing body, and heard through the hammer-strokes – not the torrent of curses that were customary – but a murmured prayer that shivered to the sky and struck into the soul of that convicted thief as nothing else had ever done before, in years: **“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”** (Lk.23:34).

**This figure of repentance believed it then** – all he’d heard of Jesus. The Lord Jesus Christ had done nothing amiss. However fairly he himself was condemned **it was a filthy parody of justice to nail this unearthly prisoner to the cross.** As the shadows gathered about this penitent man, and as he listened to the blasphemous railings of his companion in crime, he rebuked him, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk. 23:40-41). Evil man though he was, he feared God.

Of course no one is totally evil in whose soul some reverence for God still lingers. And, thus as he spoke, **faith rose in his soul;** reverence, faith and hope arose, and strange remembered tales of Jesus mingled in his mind, and it all rushed in a desperate, last appeal from his parched lips: “Jesus,” he cried, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”** (Lk. 23:42). And the Bible tells us, “[Jesus] replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (Lk. 23:43).

Oh! The joy – in the pain – for Jesus. He had said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself” (Jn. 12:32). Now it was happening; it was coming true. He was lifted up and they were coming.

**And there you and I may be too. You and I. Repentance – by a cross!**

There are things to be learned in suffering and by frustration, which it seems, many cannot learn any other way. I believe that God would often teach us in other ways if we would have it so, but our stubborn, obdurate hearts resist. God tells us, for example, that war and violence is awful, and an abrogation of his holy will; but masses of leaders and people, with their minds set upon acquisition, treat the warning lightly and seem unwilling to believe until cities are blasted and lives are wrecked, and finally some awful sense is put into their willful and stubborn minds. Yet the suffering is not sterile if repentance is born; repentance by a cross.

The most famous theologian of the twentieth century, **Karl Barth**, once said, “**God enters through a breach.**” You see what he means? When things are well with us, we are often unaware of our need of God. It is so often the consciousness of sin, frustration, disappointment and defeat that makes us aware of our need of God’s grace. When our self-assurance is fatally wounded, when our defenses are down, when we quite honestly don’t know what to do, when our pride is humbled, when we drink to the dregs the cup of sorrow and defeat – God enters in through the breach.

**Sooner or later, we will all come to some kind of Calvary in our lives.** It may happen by chance – as illness seems to come, or by the cruelty and neglect of others, or by our own folly, but the big question still remains: What, by God’s grace, will I make of my Calvary? What can I do, with his love and forgiveness and peace strengthening me, with my cross? Do what this dying thief did. If anything of personal guilt mingles in it, make it a cross of repentance. Otherwise, simply ask for him to remember you when he comes into his kingdom.

### **3. A figure of redemption.**

**The third cross – the central cross – was the cross of redemption,** and to the foot of that cross are we now come. To no holier spot than this can we ever hope to come on earth. It is indeed, as the hymn writer has it, the very “trysting place where heaven’s love and heaven’s justice meet.”

No true comparisons are possible. **This is the unique cross.** Only the cross of Christ is **the cross of redemption.** I suppose even to apply the concept of the cross to the trials that beset us is almost to prostitute the holy word. Yet Jesus encouraged us to do that as he asked us to take up our cross and follow him. Still, only the cross of Christ can redeem. Something was done on Calvary that never needed to be done again (1 Pe. 3:18). In some mysterious way Christ's redemptive work on the cross is finished work (Jn. 19:30). It cannot be added to, nor taken from.

Yet having said all that, isn't it also true that the apostle **Paul** confessed to his close Philippian friends that he longed to know **the "fellowship of [our Lord's] sufferings"** (Phil. 3:10), and even spoke to the Colossians of **"completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"** (Col. 1:24b). Imagine, completing what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ! All that he meant by that deep word is beyond our present concern, and is, indeed, so deep a subject that "all our thoughts are drowned." But it does embolden us to say that **God, in his infinite mercy, makes redemptive use of the crosses we mortals bear.** If we will allow it, God will take the worst experiences of our life and turn them into something healing and restorative and redeeming, not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of others.

**God can and will do that through the redemptive work that Jesus Christ has already accomplished on his cross.** Of all the wicked waste that goes on in the world, no waste is more wrong than wasted pain. And it need not be. Foolish as it may seem to some of you who suffer, I assert my belief that God can turn any suffering to redemptive use, even yours and mine.

Look at those **three figures** again on **three crosses**: a figure of rebellion, a figure of repentance, and a figure of redemption. With whom would you rather identify? Which cross is yours? Not **the cross of rebellion**, I trust. **A cross of repentance**, I hope, and in the shadow of his cross, **a cross of redemption** as well.

Amen

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