

Philippians 2:5-11 Imitatio Christi
Luke 23:26-49
April 10, 2022

In a few moments, we will read the great text from the second chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, which is the epistle reading for the day and which stands out notably not only because it is beautifully written, but also because of its beautiful message. It tells us that we are united with Christ, and that as a result we are to take after his example, both in action and mindset.

Way back in the 15th century there was a book written by someone named Thomas A Kempis, the last part is a reference to his hometown. The book is entitled, De Imitatione Christi, which means, The Imitation of Christ. It has become a classic of Christian Devotion and offers its readers a method of imitation that involves becoming detached from the world and then united to Christ.

On this Palm Sunday, we have marked the day as the beginning of Holy Week. Later in the week there will be a Maundy Thursday service and Good Friday is the next day. So also on this day we begin to think towards the *end* of the week we call Holy. Thus we heard the wonderful Scottish poem about the cross, and the Gospel reading for this week is from the Gospel of Luke, and we can learn from this account of the crucifixion of Jesus something of what the imitation of Christ means.

Of the seven last sayings of Jesus from the cross, three are given in Luke. The first one is very hard, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Forgiveness is perhaps the hardest of all the spiritual disciplines and the most difficult thing to imitate. We are given the example of someone willing to forgive, not only before any kind of repentance has been given, or apologies made, but while the offenses which require forgiveness are still in progress.

"God demonstrated his love for us in this," Paul wrote to the Romans, "that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Upon reflection, we might conclude that there is no other way. Sin is pervasive enough, that no matter how hard one tries, and we ought always be trying hard, if one is not to be forgiven until one is no longer sinning, then one is not to be forgiven.

The willingness of Jesus to forgive those killing him *while they were killing him*, stands out specifically because it runs counter to the way most are given to think. In many circumstances, if we forgive *while* being harmed, there is no way to be healthy and be extricated from the harmful situation.

After that consideration, the example is given.

The next situation involved the conversation between Jesus and the two others with whom he was executed. Along with the other spectators, one of the co-victims was mocking him, chiding him to save himself if he was actually who he said he was.

The other criminal rebuked the first and asked to be remembered in the coming kingdom. The response of Jesus was plain, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” The beauty of this image, not only is there an anticipation of paradise, but Jesus makes plain that it is a reasonable expectation *for a criminal undergoing capital punishment*.

There is more to this anticipation of heaven than comfort in distressing times. It changes how we view relative goodness and evil. Even the ones we consider bad, are not beyond the power of redemption. There is great faith displayed. The example is given.

We come to what is for Luke the last of Christ’s words from the cross, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Very often, this sentence is associated with a prayer at the end of life, when each person must face the final implications of mortality, and it is a tremendous thing to face them bravely, with faith, as did Jesus.

Yet all one has to do is reflect for a moment, that this prayer is also appropriate for the seasons of life previous to the end. Each day, if we have rightly understood the doctrines of our faith, we place ourselves in God’s hands; to prepare our hearts, to forgive and mend, to guide our way, and to strengthen our resolve, so that we may live according to the demands of gospel life. The demands, including sacrificial love, which may seem burdensome, but turn out to be liberating and is demonstrated for us on the cross. The example is given.

Decades later, Paul came along teaching what can only be called Christ Imitation. Imitatio Christi is the Latin way, giving it an elegance and a majesty beyond the more familiar words. It is presumptuous and naive to think we can do it fully and completely, but we can make it our aim and our prayer, for ourselves, and for one another, for our neighbors both near and far; to confess and repent our failures, to praise God for grace and forgiveness. To follow the example of Christ;

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

It is the cross. The example is given.

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