HOMILY FOR PALM/PASSION SUNDAY – C

This year we have entered into the passion as told by Luke. It is the perfect telling of the passion for the year of mercy, because against the dark backdrop of those terrible things that were done to Jesus, the light of God’s mercy is seen most clearly. And perhaps it shines most brightly in a little story towards the end of the Passion that only Luke tells – the story of the two criminals that were crucified along with Jesus. In a real sense, everything that Jesus taught about the love and mercy of God comes into clear focus here.

Here we have Jesus reaching out one last time to those who no longer had a place among his people – to criminals who were guilty of capital offences. Throughout his gospel, Luke has told story after story that makes this one simple and essential affirmation – that Jesus came into the world to seek and to save the lost, the estranged, and the marginalized – those who had been made to believe that they were beyond the bounds of God’s mercy. And here, in a most touching way, Luke shows how Jesus carried out this mission to his very last breath – even while dying in agony upon the cross.

Now I realize that some do not particularly care for this story because they have tried hard to be faithful all their lives and they don’t think it’s fair that someone who only turns to Christ in the last moments of their life should be treated the same as them. But most of us, who are a little less certain of how our lives stack up in the plus and minus column, find great comfort in Jesus’ words to the repentant criminal, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” It is comforting to know that Jesus loves us so much that he is willing to forgive all our past sins and strayings when we turn to him, even if that sinning and straying has been prolific and prolonged. It is comforting to know that Jesus loves us this much, isn’t it?

But please hear me when I say that there is more to the story than this. Remember, there were two men crucified along with Jesus. But he assured only one of a place in paradise. So while it is true that everyone is loved by Christ, and that Christ desires to bring everyone into the lie of his heavenly kingdom, this doesn’t mean that our salvation is a sure thing. We are not saved by being loved by Christ. We are saved by receiving his love and sharing in it. We are saved by turning away from what has not been good in our lives, turning to Christ and conforming our lives to his. This is what we sometimes call dying and rising with Christ. And this is what the repentant criminal did upon the cross. That’s why Jesus could assure him of a place in paradise.

I think this is part of the story that is often missed. We focus so much on the mercy shown by Jesus to a dying man, that we fail to see that this man had changed.

When we look at the story carefully, we discover that the man didn’t just ask a big favor of Jesus. He actually reoriented his life and began to do as Jesus did. He too began to reach out to the lost, pleading with the other criminal to be reconciled with Jesus, and bearing witness to his belief that Jesus was indeed the Christ. In the last few moments of his life, he had turned in a new direction and had begun to conform his life to the life of Christ. This is why Jesus could assure him of a place in paradise.

Today, from the cross, the repentant criminal reaches out to us. He calls us to share with him in the dying and rising of Jesus, to embrace the life of Christ with our own. For while Christ loves us all, to be sure, and while he is eager to show us mercy, it is to those who join him in reaching out to the lost, the poor, the sick, and the estranged that Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Fr. Rod Damico March 20, 2016