

Invitation to hope 'Today you will be with me'

Week 3

Introduction

The Reverend Sam King from Calne Baptist Church performed a social experiment on the streets of Swindon. He went up to strangers in the street asking if he could borrow a mobile phone as he had an urgent call he needed to make but his phone had run out of battery. The people of Swindon proved very hospitable. But there is a twist in this tale. He then swapped his vicar's collar and clerical shirt for the garb of a homeless person, gargled with some whisky and put a couple of cans of beer in his pocket. He then approached people with the same request. The response was very different. He found it very difficult to get eye contact from the passers-by let alone any help. The vicar explained how difficult he had found the experiment. He felt stripped of his identity when he gave up his clothes and status. When Jesus allowed himself to be hung on a cross, he was stripped of his clothes to become worse than a homeless person. He was stripped to face an ordeal considered shameful and cursed by both his own people and by Roman culture.

Two other men were dying on crosses beside Jesus that day. To one of them Jesus makes a promise: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. Amid extreme pain and suffering Jesus offers words of comfort, privilege and belonging that the dying man could cling to. Jesus offers hope and hospitality and a VIP welcome to the person who least expected it – a convicted felon.

Prayer

Father God, judge of the living and the dead, we thank you for the life you have given to us. We ask for your help as we reflect on your invitation to hope. By your Spirit would you guide and help us to gain fresh hope for today, for tomorrow and for all eternity. Amen.

Setting the scene

In the exchange of words between Jesus and a criminal dying beside him we are given a significant snapshot of the welcome God is offering to us amidst the trauma and tragedy of crucifixion. Can you imagine how difficult speaking even a single word would have been for any of those men, slowly suffocating to death while being nailed to a cross? Trying to get a word out would have been excruciating, as slow asphyxiation through exhaustion was the ultimate means of death behind crucifixion. Yet Jesus chooses to use some of his last painful breaths to speak words of comfort and compassion to a stranger.

This conversation demonstrates a story of incredible grace. At the heart of the scene is divine hospitality, where God invites the undeserving and unexpected to come home with him. This is a very precious story for me, and for many others who through it have begun to grasp something of God's unconditional love. It is a beautiful fact that as Jesus dies to give human beings the opportunity of forgiveness, Jesus takes time to help the one right next to him. Many would have rejected this man as a lost cause, as a worthless criminal, as a nobody – but Jesus singles him out, offering hope not only to him, but to so many others throughout the centuries.

Luke 23.39–43

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

Focus

As Jesus hung on the cross, the three dying men got into conversation. One of them chose to join in with the sneers of the crowds. But the other one challenged him: 'Don't you fear God... since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' In the midst of the maelstrom of malevolence, one voice stood out to offer a minority report on the situation. This criminal's last words show that he saw what everyone else seemed to miss. He alone seemed to recognise three crucial things about Jesus.

First, he recognised Jesus' solidarity with them: all three men were in the same boat, facing the same fate. They were all about to suffer death at the hands of a brutal Roman regime, despite the huge difference that one of them was innocent.

Secondly, he recognised Jesus' sanctity: While everyone else laughed at a man who said he was a 'king', a 'saviour' and a 'messiah', this criminal realised that the claims might be true. Why else would an innocent man die? What if his kingdom was beyond the grave?

Thirdly he recognised Jesus' sovereignty. Despite the fact that Jesus was naked, dying on a cross, no hint of pomp and splendour about him. Despite the mocking sign nailed to the cross and the ironic crown of thorns rammed on his head, the criminal somehow knew that Jesus had power to affect eternity.

Looking back on this incident now, with the benefit of 2,000 years of theological reflection, it is hard to miss the profound level of understanding this criminal demonstrates of the events he was caught up in. Apart from Jesus himself, it seems that no one at all had understood that the crucifixion was not just a terrible miscarriage of justice, but was the very means by which Jesus was going to be crowned King. Jesus solemnly promises this self-confessed criminal two things – he will be with Jesus and he will be in paradise.

What an invitation to hope for those of us who are lonely, for those of us who are suffering, for those of us who are dying. This is not just hospitality – it is a VIP welcome that we do not deserve, but we are offered anyway.

Personal reflection questions

1. What strikes you as strange about the conversation between the three dying men?
2. How do you think Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross that, 'Today you will be with me in paradise' made him feel?
3. How confident do you feel about facing death?
4. Jesus invites us to new hope. He also models to us inviting others into new hope. When was the last time you invited someone to talk about faith? How did it go?
5. What do you find most difficult about sharing your hope, or sharing your faith?
6. Think of people around you who really need hope in their lives right now. How can we encourage each other to invite them to experience the hope that we have?

Final thoughts

It is difficult to talk about death these days, and life after death especially. As a result of changing cultural trends, it is harder even to talk about faith, and hope for the future. I am challenged by the invitation Jesus issues from the cross. Heaven is not just for that dying criminal. Because of the cross all of us are included in the invitation to spend eternity with Jesus in paradise. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we will respond to the death of Jesus like the criminal laughing at Jesus' claims or the one who asks for Jesus to remember him?

Closing prayer

Dear loving heavenly Father, we praise you.
We thank you for the hope of resurrection we have through Jesus' death.
We thank you for the hope of life we have through Jesus' sacrifice.
We thank you for the hope of paradise we have through Jesus' agony.
Help us to trust Christ's promise whatever our feelings.
Help us to share the hope we have whatever the cost.
Amen.