

Tre Ore – 2009
Text – Luke 23:43

And He said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

THE 2ND WORD

Paradise! It has long held a place in the imagination of the human race. It spans all cultures & is used to create a counter-image to the miseries of human civilization.

Lately, in our country, it seems like every day we hear of another angry individual shooting four or five others because the miseries of life have driven them over the edge.

Pirates are back in the news, something that seemed to be a thing of the distant past with the long gone era of wooden sailing ships. Terrorism has become a normal part of the fabric of our lives. Unstable countries are striving for nuclear weapons. Millions of children have their lives ended each year before they're born.

It seems like President Obama can't find a single cabinet member who has paid their taxes. Corporate executives were gambling with billions of dollars & lost it all. Workers have been losing their jobs at the fastest rate in recorded history. The suffering & misery goes on & on. If you study history honestly though, you'll find that it's nothing new.

Way back in Genesis, Moses wrote, “The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, & that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” So God started over after The Flood, but the results were the same:

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city & a tower with its top in the heavens, & let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the

whole earth.” Men were still disobeying the merciful & gracious will of God. They wanted to be independent of Him, & to make a name for themselves.

We don't see one bit of difference today in how men & women conduct their lives. As Frank Sinatra once sang, all of us want to be able to glory in the fact that, “I did it my way.” Sadly, the book of Proverbs tells us the end result of such an attitude, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” We're here to contemplate the death that man's way has led to. It's the death of Jesus Christ, & it leads us to the promise of Paradise.

We like to believe we can achieve Paradise on our own. The lost continent of Atlantis has been thought by some to be Paradise. The state of Florida was explored in a search for the fountain of youth. I remember the theme showing up in several of the episodes of the original Star Trek series as Captain Kirk discovers alien life living in what seems to be perfect harmony.

But who would have thought that a man could find Paradise while being crucified on a cross? Quite frankly, that's a repulsive thought. Even the suicidal teachings of some versions of Islam have this going for them – they are sensational in effect for minds that are twisted by hatred. But there's nothing sensational about hanging on a cross till one suffocates to death.

That death has not inspired hundreds, or even tens, of people to voluntarily follow suit as the suicide bombers have. Yet the thief crucified next to Jesus found Paradise that day, in that way. “And He said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’”

Where are you looking for Paradise? Do you work hard at your career hoping to enjoy the golden years of retirement? Is sexual fulfillment your idea of Paradise? Maybe political power is the quest you're after. Are you seeking to avoid inconvenience or hardship at all costs? Do the things you possess command your greatest attention?

We may not consider those priorities to be literally a search for Paradise, but we do use them to counteract the miseries of this life. We pursue them to find comfort or protection from the injustices & hardships in this dangerous & broken world. As such, anything that takes our attention away from seeking 1st the kingdom of God is leading us away from life, not towards it. That's counterintuitive to natural man. We are not born to think that way from mere physical birth, & our Lord makes that point in Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways..." Instinctively, our efforts at striving for Paradise are counterproductive. They lead to spiritual death, instead of life.

Already the 3rd chapter of Genesis has an excellent example of the fallacy of human thought in regard to finding fulfillment: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, & that it was a delight to the eyes, & that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit & ate, & she also gave some to her husband who was with her, & he ate."

The result, the LORD God said to Adam, "...for you are dust, & to dust you shall return. ...therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden... He drove out the man, & at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim & a flaming sword... to guard the way to the tree of life."

By our own hand, mankind has been suffering & dying ever since. The pain, misery & suffering, of this life, can be unbearable & it's because we're searching for Paradise in all the wrong places. Our thoughts are not God's thoughts. Our ways are not God's ways. Ours is the way of death.

It took the thief all the way to his cross, to within hours of the end, or the death, of his earthly life, before he realized that he'd been on the path to eternal death. And there's a vast difference between earthly death & the eternal one. We don't necessarily keep that distinction clear in our minds, but the thief on the cross illustrates it perfectly.

He was within hours of spiritual, eternal death, yet there on the cross God snatched the thief from the jaws of hell. He still died the physical death, but he gained eternal life instead of damnation. None of his past mattered, not how many possessions he gained, not his career, not any sexual fulfillment he ever achieved, not any hardship he ever avoided, no political influence he may have sought after. The only thing that mattered, for all of eternity, were these words of the Man dying on the cross next to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." All the thief's transgressions were forgiven. All his guilt was erased.

In his death on the cross he found life. Despite our human way of thinking, we too can find life in our trials & suffering, but we'll do so only through the power of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior. If we reject faith in Him, we'll only find death even in the good things of this life. If we accept faith in Jesus, we will find life, however strange it may seem, in our suffering.

That is the message of Jesus Christ as He speaks from the cross, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." We may not end up in Paradise itself today,

but we do have His certain promise of eternal life already this moment in time. It's there to see if you will use the eyes of faith that our heavenly Father has given to us to see with. Amen.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering & shame; & I love that old cross where the dearest & best for a world of lost sinners was slain.
Amen.