

DAY 29.

Jesus saved the thief.

Now the thieves which were crucified together with Jesus, also uttered blasphemies against Him. But after a little, he who hung on Christ's right hand, when he saw His great patience and long-suffering, with which He so lovingly prayed to His Father for them who heaped such shame upon Him, and fearfully tormented Him, became utterly changed, and began to be moved by exceeding sorrow and repentance for his sins. And this he showed outwardly, reproving by his words his fellow-thief, who still continued to blaspheme, and saying: "Don't you fear God, seeing that you, too, are near to death?"

"Although from obstinate confidence you fear not men, and think nothing of your bodily pains, yet surely you must fear God, and this, too, at the last moment of your life, for He has power to destroy both your body and soul in the hell of fire. And although we suffer like punishment with Him, yet far different are our merits. We, indeed, suffer justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done no evil." He, then, who but just now was a blasphemer, is now a confessor and a preacher, distinguishing good from evil, blaming the sinner, and making excuse for the innocent one; he who a little before was an unbelieving thief, is now the confessor of God Almighty. O good Jesus, this is the sudden change of your Right Hand, at which he hung. Your Right Hand touched him inwardly, and straight away he was changed into another man. In this, O Lord, you have declared your patience, for out of a stone you have raised up a child unto Abraham. In truth, the good thief received the light of faith from no other source than from that bright light on the candlestick of the Cross, which, shining there in darkness, dispersed the darkness of night. But what does this mean, except that our Lord Jesus, out of His immense goodness alone, looked with the eyes of His mercy

upon him, although He found no merit in him, save what it pleased Him in His goodness to give? For even as God out of His goodness alone gives unto His elect what none has a right to claim, so He bestows on the wicked what is due to them from the equity of justice. Therefore David also said: “He saved me, because He desired me.” And this was why that thief, before our Lord touched his heart with the rays of His grace and love, blasphemed Christ along with the other thief, thus proving in truth what first of all he did of himself, and then what was afterwards worked in him by grace. At first, indeed, he did as the other, for he, too, was a child of wrath; but when Christ’s precious Blood, the price of our redemption, was poured forth, and paid to the Father in payment of our debt, then at that happy moment he asked of God an alms for his own good, and no sooner asked than received it. For how does one alms lessen that measureless treasure! Or how could our tender Lord, Whose property it is to have mercy, have refused it for him? Indeed, He gave more than that thief asked for. Yet how could that thief avoid the intense heat of the burning fire which was so near him! Truly, this was the fire, which had been sent down by the Father from heaven upon earth, which for long indeed had smoldered, but which now, kindled afresh, and fed by the wood of the cross, and sprinkled with the oil of mercy, and blown into a blaze by the breath, as it were, of the reproaches and blasphemies of the Jews, threw up its flames to heaven, whereby that thief was wholly kindled and set on fire, and his love became strong as death, so that he said: “I, indeed, suffer no grievous punishment, for I more than deserve it; but that this innocent one, who had no sin in Him, should be so tormented, contrary to what is just and good, this, in truth, added grievous sorrow to my sorrow.” O admirable faith of this thief! He despised all the punishment that could be inflicted on him; he feared not the fury of the people, who, like mad dogs, were barking out their rage against Jesus; he heeded not the chief priests; he dreaded not all the executioners with their many kinds of torments and weapons; but before them all, with a heart that knew no fear, he confessed Christ to be the true Son of God, and the Lord of the whole universe; and, at the same time, he confounded the Jews, by confessing that our Lord had done no evil, and that therefore they had wrongfully crucified Him. O wonderful faith! O mighty constancy! O incomprehensible love of this poor thief, that cast out all fear from him. He had,

indeed, well drunk, and was drunken with that new wine, which in the wine-press of the Cross had been pressed out of that sweet grape-cluster, Christ Jesus, and therefore without shame he confessed Christ before all the people. From the very beginning of the Passion the apostles and disciples had all fled away, and forsaken Christ: St. Peter himself, terrified at the voice of one woman-servant, had denied Christ, yet not even in death did this poor thief forsake our Lord, but confessed Him before all those armed men to be the Lord of heaven. Who can worthily celebrate the virtues of this man? Who can tell of them? Who has taught him so quickly that faith of his, and the clear knowledge of all virtues, except the very Wisdom of the Father, Christ Jesus, Who hung near him on the Cross? Him Whom, even from the promises made to the patriarchs, and from the confirmed oracles of the prophets, and from the teaching of the scriptures, and from the interpretation of figures, the Jews could not, or would not know, this poor thief learned to know by penance. He confessed Christ to be the Son of God, although he saw Him before him full of wretchedness, and want, and torments, and dying of human weakness; and he confessed Him at a time when the apostles, who had seen His signs, and wonders, and marvelous miracles, denied Him. The nails were then holding his hands and feet immoveable upon the cross, nor had he anything free about him, except his heart and tongue; yet he offered to God all that he could freely give Him, so that, in the words of Scripture, “with his heart he believed unto justice, and with his mouth confessed Christ unto salvation.” O utterly infinite and unsearchable mercy of God! What kind of man was he when he was driven to the cross, and what, when he left it? Not that we should ascribe this change to his own cross, but to the goodness and power of Christ crucified. He came to the cross polluted with another’s blood; he was taken down from it cleansed by the Blood of Christ. He came to the Cross still cruel-hearted and full of anger, and upon the Cross he became so meek of heart and compassionate, that he wailed over the sufferings of others more than his own. One member alone was left to him, and he came at the last hour to work in God’s vineyard, yet so zealously did he labor that he had finished his work before the others, and first of all received his reward. He acted, indeed, like a just man, for, first of all, he accused himself and confessed his sins, saying: “And we, indeed, justly, for we receive the due

reward of our deeds.” Secondly, he made an excuse for Christ, and confessed Him to be the Just One, when he said: “But this Man, what evil has He done?” Thirdly, he showed forth brotherly love, for he said: “Don’t you fear God?” Fourthly, with all his members,—at least, with all he could offer,—and with a look of love, and a devout heart, and a lowly spirit, he turned to Christ, and fervently prayed: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” By this prayer he proclaimed Christ to be the Lord of heaven, and therefore Very God, for heaven is God’s alone. He saw nothing in Christ, save poverty, pain, and blood, with death coming over Him, none of which signified, spoke in any way of the Lord God, but quite the contrary; yet he said firmly: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Great, then, was the justice, and humility, and resignation which he showed forth in this prayer, since he asked only for a little remembrance of himself, acknowledging himself unworthy to ask anything great. Nor did he pray for the salvation of his body, for he gladly desired to die for his sins; and it was more pleasant for him to die with Christ, than to live any longer. Nor did he pray to be preserved by our Lord from the pains of hell or of purgatory, nor did he ask for the kingdom of heaven, but he resigned himself utterly to God’s will, and offered himself all to Christ, to do with him what He would. Nothing, then, save grace and mercy, did he pray for in his humility, even as David prayed; saying: “Deal with your servant according to your mercy.” Therefore, because he had humbly and wisely prayed, the Eternal Wisdom, that reads the hearts of those who pray, heard his prayer, and opened wide the rich treasures of His grace, bestowed upon him far more than he had dared to ask.

O incomprehensible goodness of God! How clearly do you declare by this that you desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn to You, and live. You have shown forth by this, and fulfilled what of old you promised by the mouth of your Prophet; saying: “In the hour when ever the sinful man shall mourn for his sins, I will remember his iniquity no more.” Not many years of severe penance did you impose upon him, not many pains of purgatory for the expiation and satisfaction of his sins; but as if you have utterly forgotten his evil deeds, and could see nothing but virtue in him,

you said to him: “To-day you shall be with Me in paradise.” O immense mercy of God! Our tender Lord in His pity forgot all the evil deeds which had been so numberless in that poor thief, and pardoned him when he repented, while to the good in him, which was small indeed, He gave so noble and magnificent a reward.

Exceedingly rich is our loving God, nor does He stand in need of our goods; but He seeks for a heart which turns to Him with lowliness and resignation, such as He found in this poor thief. For He said Himself: “Turn to Me, and I will turn to you.” When, this thief therefore, so bravely and efficaciously turned himself to God, straight away his prayer was not only received, but heard. For our Lord rejected not his prayer, nor said: “See how I hang here in grievous pain, and I behold before My eyes My Mother in sore affliction, standing in the midst of this great agony, to whom as yet I have not spoken one word, so that to hear You now would not be just.” Nothing like this, I say, did our Lord speak to the thief; no, rather, He heard his prayer at once, and spoke in answer that sweet word: “Amen, I say to You, this day you shall be with Me in paradise.” O tender goodness, O incomprehensible mercy of God! O great prudence of the thief! He saw that the treasures of his Lord lay open wide, and were scattered about on all sides. Who then should forbid him to take as much as would pay his Lord’s debt? And O, the damnable hardness of the wicked thief, whom neither the reproof of his fellow, nor the patience of Christ, nor so many signs of love and mercy that shone forth in Christ, could soften and convert! He saw, indeed, that alms abounded at the rich man’s gate, that more was given than asked for, yet he was too proud and obstinate to wish to ask. He saw that life was given, that the kingdom of heaven was being bestowed, yet he would not bend his heart to desire them, therefore he shall not have them. He preferred blasphemies and curses, and they shall come upon him, and that for ever and ever.

These new first-fruits of the grape, which our Lord Jesus obtained on the wood of the Cross, from our unfruitful soil, after much sweat of His brow and abundant watering of His own precious Blood, He sent to His heavenly Father with great joy, as a precious gift, by the heavenly messengers, the holy angels. But if there is joy amongst the angels of God over one sinner doing penance, what will be the joy amongst them, what the exultation, at the salvation of this thief, of whom they had almost lost hope, and thought that he had perished? With what joy, let us imagine, did the Father of heaven receive these first-fruits of the harvest of His Son's Passion? But to Christ Himself, although He, too, was able to get some joy at this conversion, there came from there still greater affliction, for by His Divine wisdom He easily foresaw that this thief would be to many the cause of damnation; to those, namely, who make up their mind to pass their whole life in sin, hoping, nevertheless, to obtain forgiveness and grace at the moment of death; a most foolish thing indeed, for never do we read in the Scripture that it has happened thus to any man. Truly, they who have sought after God only when compelled by necessity, will not, it is to be feared, find Him at hand in their hour of need.

Meanwhile, no man can trust in God too much; nor has any man ever been forsaken by Him, who turned to Him with his whole heart, and leaned upon Him with loving trust.