

“Saints by grace” Luke 23:33-43

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Today is the last day of the Church year, we have made our journey through the most important events in Jesus' life once more. Today we celebrate All Saints Day and we remember those saints from our parish who have passed away this year. Louis Giersch, Audrey Henschke, Joy Krause, Rex Leditschke, Olly Nitschke, Vera Pfeiffer, Brian Scheer.

This day is called All *Saints* Day. Let me ask you, do you think that all those who passed away really were saints? How close did you know them? Do you think any of us is worthy of the title 'saint'? The closer we know someone the clearer we can see how far we are from being true saints.

But, nevertheless, this is All *Saints* Day. And those our brothers and sisters who have passed away can be called saints in the fullest sense of this word. Not because of what kind of lives they lived, not because of their deeds, words or thoughts, but because they were baptized in Christ.

They were and are saints because they were baptized in Christ. Because in their baptism Jesus Christ took their sins upon Himself and gave them His holiness and righteousness. Martin Luther called it wonderful exchange: when we give Jesus the only thing that truly belongs to us, our sin, and when He gives us what belongs to Him, eternal life, place in God's Kingdom and countless blessings which would be impossible for us to merit.

That's why we can say, these our brothers are sisters are true saints of God, not because they deserved or merited it, but because of God's grace for Jesus sake. In the same way we all are saints of God. True saints, not by our merit, but by God's grace.

Today's Gospel reminds us once more about this contra-intuitive way in which we inherit the Kingdom of God and all those things which God the Father has prepared for His saints. Only by God's grace and only through faith in Jesus.

Let's take a look at these events which Luke has recorded for us. This is not a pleasant picture. Jesus is brought to the place called Skull, where He is crucified. The Holy One of God, the innocent one, together with two criminals.

Then Luke describes the attitude of different groups of people. And it is interesting to observe how well Luke reveals what was going on. What they were thinking about Jesus, why they were so much against Him. Let's look at them all briefly.

Initially Luke describes rulers. They are the same people who plotted to arrest and to kill Jesus. The same who pulled off this conspiracy, ending with Jesus crucifixion. What did they think about Jesus?

"He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" They knew what Jesus had done. How many people He had helped. They knew that many believed that Jesus was God's Christ, His Chosen One.

But they had got totally wrong idea about the mission of Christ. For a long time they had been waiting for someone to liberate them from Roman's rule. To give them back the kingdom of David. They had been waiting for the Christ of God. They, rulers and leaders of the nation, of course, expected that this Messiah would cooperate with them, and not, instead, would go about doing His own thing.

Seeing that more and more people followed Jesus, they decided that "it is better that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (John 11:50 ESV) in case if Romans would get angry with Jesus followers.

Ironically, they were right. Just in a different sense. That was exactly God's plan - better that one man should die, not all of us, and the Son of God choose to become this one man, to die instead of us.

Before this day, the rulers were afraid of Jesus, for they could not do anything against Him. Now He hangs on the cross. He lost, they won. They are smart, He is foolish. Now they can stand and challenge Him. "If you are the Christ of God, save yourself!"

Also the soldiers mocked him, coming up ... and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" For them Jesus was just one more rebel. From time to time there were attempts to seize the power by means of riots against Roman rule.

As Jesus had this inscription "The King of Jews", Roman soldiers enjoyed their power over Him. They had crucified one more rebel, one more who dared to claim that He is something against the rule of almighty Rome. "If you are the King... save yourself!"

Even the criminal, living his last hours, blasphemed Jesus saying: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" He was just a criminal. Jesus, on the other hand, only few days ago, was adored by entire city of Jerusalem. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mat 21:9) Now they were equal. There is a saying, "misery likes company". Now even this criminal could rejoice for someone seemingly very special was in the same situation as he.

You see, they all called Jesus, the Christ of God, the King of Jews, the Chosen One of God. But they all thought that He had come to grab the power in Jerusalem. That the Christ of God would come to conquer what?

Not even the Earth... Just one tiny spot in Mediterranean. Not too big a task for God, Creator of Universe?! We see how wrong were human misperceptions about God's true intentions and their cosmic scale.

But, of course, if you claim to be the Chosen One, you are supposed to come with power, and might, overthrowing your enemies, exactly as mighty armies in all times have done. Of course, you have to be able to save at least yourself, if you wanted to save others. Right? What kind of Christ are you, if you hang of the cross? That was their reasoning.

They all challenged Jesus to save Himself. We can see these words as a parallel to three temptations by Satan in the wilderness. Just do it for yourself! Just show them that you can do it! Prove them that they are wrong and you are right!

Nothing would be easier for Jesus than to obey and to do what He was challenged to do. Save yourself! Why didn't He save Himself when He was challenged to do so? Why didn't He prove that they were wrong?

Because He loved these people more than His life. Which people, we may wonder? Each of them, the rulers, the soldiers, the criminal, He loved all of them more than His own life. He loves each of us more than His life. Also you. Yes, you!

He stayed on the cross, because He loved all these people more than His life. He had come to lay down His life so that they can live, so that we can live. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Not much has changed today. Many still are willing to scoff and mock Jesus, now scoffing and mocking His Church. Actually in our country it happens more and more often. Because they don't know what they are doing. They don't know God as He is - what He has done, does and is ready to do for them.

Some are afraid that Jesus and His Church try to take away their freedom to do whatever they want, some may be concerned that Gospel message can actually take away their power, some laugh about the Gospel for that sounds so foolish to have a saviour who was crucified. And then all this strange talk about the resurrection...

It is sad, that people don't know that the Son of God Jesus Christ love us, captives of sin and death and our own ignorance and foolishness, loves us so much that He is ready to give up His life, so that only we could live.

How much would you give to have such a friend?! One who is almighty, powerful, knowledgeable, wise, to whom belongs everything that is, loving, just, merciful, gracious, and who loves you so much that is ready to give His life for you. Who wouldn't want to have relations with such a person? But what can we do get it?

Luke gives us an answer. He describes one more conversation. Totally different. This time the speaker is the other criminal. He rebuked the first one, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

And then He proceeds with something amazing. “He said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.””

Who is this person who says these words? He is a criminal. He lives out his last few hours, hanging on the cross. He admits that for him this punishment is something that he deserves. That's a due reward. There is nothing he can do to make up for all the wrong he has done during his life. Nothing...

There was no more hope for this criminal in this life. It was gone. Besides, gone astray. They only hope was to have a new life. New life where everything would be different. Without sin, without injustice, without pain and suffering. No one can merit it, no one can earn it. That's something too great. The least the guy who hangs on the cross.

Who could give Him such an incredible gift? Only one. God Almighty Himself. And there He was. Hanging on the cross, next to the criminals. Seeing Jesus with eyes of true faith the criminal said: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

I have nothing to offer, nothing to give, I can’t even make up for what I’ve done. I can only pray. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” That was a prayer of repentant sinner, who realized that death is what he justly deserves, and only God’s grace can make things different.

You know, he got his answer. Right away. The most wonderful answer one could dream of. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Today you will be with me in Paradise. Today you will have a new life, today you will have a life together with me. In Paradise.

Where God’s marvelous creation lights up in all its glory. Where God Himself is present with us. Where we can finally be what we are created to be. Fully and abundantly. Where our ultimate destiny is fulfilled. Where joy of this new life exceeds anything we today can even distantly imagine. Shalom... total, all embracing shalom, overflowing peace and joy.

Sometimes those who trust other gods are offended by the Gospel and grumble about the fact that only those who trust in Jesus will enter Paradise. They don’t have any reason to complain. Paradise, the Kingdom of God is open for everyone who only wants to enter it. For everyone. No merits required.

Entrance fee is already paid. Jesus paid for your place in Paradise with His blood.

You just need to desire it, and to understand that it can only be received as a gift. To understand that our death here and eternity and God’s anger for our sins are well deserved, and eternal life, as well as earthly life, is a wonderful gift of God. Much, much larger than we can comprehend, and infinitely larger than we could ever merit.

This is what we need to remember today, celebrating All saints day. Our Heavenly Father’s love is much greater than we can imagine, His gifts are much dearer and richer than we could ever dream of, and everyone can receive them thanks to Jesus.

If only we desire them, they are ours. As soon as we are ready to receive them, as soon as we ask, Jesus answer is – I truly say, you, and all the saints, will be with me in Paradise.

Amen.