

# Jesus Remembers

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"Jesus Christ the Returning King"*

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord God,  
help us turn our hearts to you  
and hear what you will speak,  
for you speak peace to your people  
through Christ, our Lord.  
Amen.

## Scripture: Luke 23:33-43 (NRSVue)

<sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup> And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine <sup>37</sup> and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" <sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" <sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

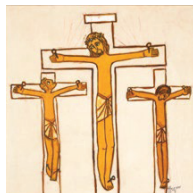
**The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.**

## **Meditation – Jesus Remembers**

Every Friday evening, until his death, an old man could be spotted feeding shrimp to the sea gulls along an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Many years earlier, in October of 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker in his B-17 had a mission to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. Along the way his plane *The Flying Fortress* had an unexpected detour and got lost at sea. Beyond the reach of radio, fuel began running dangerously low. The men were forced to ditch their plane in the ocean.

For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions fought the waves, weather, and the scorching sun. Sharks, larger than their rafts, rammed against them on sleepless nights. But their biggest enemy proved to be starvation. After eight days their rations had run out. Only a miracle would get them through. And it happened. After one of the crewmen led the group in a prayer and a hymn, Captain Eddy dozed off to sleep... until something landed on his head. Everyone's eyes were on Eddy's head and the sea gull perched upon it. The gull meant food... *if Eddy could catch it*. And he did. The men were able to get protein and they used the remains for bait to get fish. Not only their stomachs were nourished, but their hope. All from a sacrifice of a lonely sea gull, surprisingly hundreds of miles from land.

All but one man made it back home. And Eddy never forgot. He remembered the sea gull. And so every Friday evening on the eastern Florida seacoast, you could see the old man, slightly bent over, with white hair and bushy eyebrows, feeding sea gulls with his bucket full of shrimp. Saying thanks and remembering the sea gull.



**'Jesus, remember me when you come  
into your kingdom.'**

Jesus remembers. And he doesn't forget us either. *"Do not be afraid,"* says Jesus, *"you are of more value than many sparrows."* And we remember him for his sacrifice for us. Throughout the passion, Jesus had been alone:

- His disciples deserted, denied, betrayed, and fled from him.
- Pilate declared him innocent, yet still consigned Christ to the worst form of death sentence: *crucifixion*.
- The "King of the Jews" placard he ordered was a mockery.
- Despite all this, there is no bitterness in him: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

But now on the cross, Christ was no longer alone. There were two by his side—one to his right and another to his left. These were not disciples nor saints, but two criminals hanging on their own crosses. Once again Jesus finds himself in bad company. Once again sinners find themselves in good company with Jesus. All three experiencing together the agony, the shame, and impending death that always comes with crucifixion. One criminal hurled insults at Jesus. In fact the Greek word used is *blasphemeo*.

*"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and save us."*

This was also the taunt of the religious leaders. They thought the sign of God's favor was that Jesus would be delivered *from* death. But they had no idea Jesus would be delivered by God *through* death.

Of the four gospels, Luke alone tells us of the good criminal who rebuked the sarcasm of his fellow criminal. Church tradition says his name was Dismas. There are several scenes like this in Luke, where in the midst of a very ugly situation, an unlikely person enters to bring hope. This person was often one of those left out by society: women, gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, and underdogs. You see, it's the "least of these" in Luke who have the deepest insight into the character of Jesus. The criminal Dismas joins Luke's chorus of outsiders who powerfully witness to Christ.

*"Don't you fear God since you're under the same death sentence? We're getting what we deserve for our deeds. But this man—he's innocent—he's done nothing wrong."*

Dismas then calls out to Jesus by name: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* Don't forget me, Jesus. I don't deserve to be remembered. I'm at fault. So when you sit upon your throne, don't forget me!

The criminal made his bold confession: *"Jesus you are a King. You have authority. And I trust in you."* The convicted Dismas didn't look to himself for deliverance. He instead looked to the innocent Jesus. And Jesus didn't dismiss Dismas. *"TRULY I tell you,"* says Jesus, *"TODAY you will be with me in Paradise."*

I love how Bishop Ambrose put it centuries ago:

*"More abundant is the favor shown than the request made... For life is to be with Christ, because where Christ is, is the kingdom."*

Jesus did MORE than the criminal asked before he even died and rose again. Jesus has the power in life and in death. In Christ, we have power in life and in death. The word *paradise* is an interesting word. *Paradise* means garden. The word *paradise* was used originally for the Garden of Eden. The prophet Isaiah used the word *paradise* to describe a future bliss of God's people. Jesus understands *paradise* as the state of bliss the thief will experience directly after death.

Hear the good news, Immanuel: Jesus the Messiah has the kingly right and the desire to open wide the doors of paradise to those who cry out to him. Jesus came to save, and he wants to save, and he is still saving. The Apostle's Creed says that Jesus will *"come to judge the quick and the dead."* Here Jesus offers his judgment upon the criminal: *You are acquitted.* You will be in relationship with me for eternity. You are forgiven and not forgotten. I will remember you. He remembers us in our hardship.

One of theologian Karl Barth's most famous sermons was on the two thieves. He preached the sermon to prisoners in a Swiss prison. I'd like to close with his moving words:

*"Consider the fact: Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and on his left and went to their death with him. He did not die for the sake of the good world, he died for the sake of an evil world, not for the pious, but for the godless, not for the just, but for the unjust, for the deliverance, the victory and the joy of all, that they might have life."*

*"We are such people, all of us—you in this house, which is called a prison, with all the burden that brought you here and with your particular experiences in this place—those others of us outside who have different experiences and yet are, believe me, in the same predicament. In reality we all are these people, these crucified criminals. And only one thing matters now."*

In faith, let us pray with the criminal:

*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

And let us hear King Jesus speaking over us:

*"Truly I tell you, you will be with me in Paradise."*

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Jesus Christ the Returning King"* by Janusz Antosz

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