

Christ the King 2013 Luke 23.35-43

The woman is in her early seventies, well-dressed and immaculately groomed. She wears a good tweed suit, and has short silver hair. She is modest, polite, has perfect manners; she is “a lady.” She is someone we might notice at the back of our abbey church on a Sunday morning. The wrinkles in her face come from a lifetime of smiles, and we wonder whether she was a teacher, maybe of pre-school. Children would love her, and we too feel comfortable in her presence. We feel we might learn something important, something wise. So we listen as she is interviewed. She is answering the question, “what is your most meaningful memory?”

“I did this little dance, well it was just a few steps, not a full progression like you would do for a recital. I was wearing a new dress with red shoes, and white lace anklets. The dress was pink, with puffy sleeves and had embroidery down the front. When my mother gave me that dress, I jumped for joy! My best friend had a dress exactly like it, so we felt like twins. It was my birthday, and my older brother took me to a café where he was meeting his friends. There was a nice song playing, so I went through my little steps and did a final twirl. My brother’s friends laughed and clapped and whistled. They called out, “Come over here; we’ll give you some ice cream; you will be on stage one day.” I laughed and blushed, and of course I never did go onstage. But I remember that little dance. I remember the strawberry ice cream, the pink dress, and my brother stroking my hair.”

The interviewer says, “Your brother sounds very special.” The lady smiles and says, “Oh yes, I took care of him until the end. Just yesterday I visited his grave, and said, ‘Soon, soon, I will come to join you, and see, here I am.’”

This scene is from a Japanese movie, “After Life,” which follows a group of the newly dead, young and old, good and bad. They are in a retreat center before entering the afterlife. They have one week to choose a memory from their earthly life, and work on the details. The staff helps them film it, and when they have seen the film, they carry that one important memory into the afterlife.

What memory would *you* choose if God gives you this opportunity when you die?

I have spent some time with this question. By focusing on life in this world, it has helped me think more constructively about the loss of it, which frightens and horrifies us, even if we have some vague hope for the next life. The movie has a different religious background from ours. It seems to be Buddhist. It doesn't mention God or judgment or heaven or salvation. But there are two things about the movie, which I think are solidly Christian. First, there is a strong connection, or bridge, between this world and the next—they aren't separate, isolated entities. And, second, there really is a gentle glow of blessing and opportunity in what we fear as only permanent loss.

The woman could easily have spoken bitterly. "Once I was a little girl with all of life ahead of me. Now I am old, and about to die. Once I wore pink; now I wear grey. Once I was loved; now I am alone. It is unfair to lose everything that is precious and beautiful."

In that version, we see one possible attitude towards life and death. It is self-centered and resentful. It is filled with regret. This was the attitude chosen by the prodigal son's older brother, and by the unrepentant thief in today's gospel. It is understandable, and most of us indulge it occasionally until we learn something better. But if you get stuck in it, it is a dead end. It leads nowhere. It leads to oblivion and misery, the ultimate fear, which we call hell.

By contrast, there is the possibility that the end of life brings you home, like the prodigal son, to all that is good. The destination has music and finery and welcome and joy. And the journey that gets you there is fully validated. Even your mistakes and foolishness have their role in getting you where you want to be. There is nothing to regret if sin helps bring you back to the father. Both the prodigal son and the good thief learn this.

The good thief has his character defects. But he shows us how to reach out even when we are pinned down. He shows us how to avoid the "stinking thinking" indulged in by the other thief. The good thief shows us humility ("we deserve this punishment"). He shows us that on life's carousel it is never too late to reach for the gold ring ("when you come into your kingdom, if there is a kingdom, remember me").

Our meditation could end there with the choice of living hopefully versus giving into despair, of accepting what you cannot change versus resenting the inevitable, of being thankful versus wishing for what you cannot have.

What enables a Christian to choose the right option—hope, acceptance, gratitude—is the man on the middle cross. He shares our experience even to the point of dying with us. The story suggests that the death of Jesus is not just a historical event. He will die for us and with us and beside us, whenever it becomes our time to die. He will be there to offer words glowing with encouragement and possibility--if we have the hearts and ears to hear.

The Japanese woman's story has elements that are frivolous. We may smile condescendingly at her pink dress, her jumping for joy, the ice cream, the little pirouette. We may consider them childish, silly, sentimental. But her delight in the birthday treat is only the raw material, the building blocks. From it she constructs a life of devotion and service ("I took care of him to the end"). That is why, even at the end, she looks ahead, as the good thief does. She tells her brother, "Soon, very soon, I will come to you." These are words we may someday say to our older brother, the man on the middle cross. He answers, "Today you will be with me in paradise." It is a promise that makes death less frightening and more of a gift.

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