

**2<sup>nd</sup> word from Cross for  
St. Mary's Church, March 25, 2005  
preached by Father Johnson of St. John's Church, Staten Island**

Two crosses flanked our Savior's cross: one cross on the left, and another on the right. Both crosses held people who had been called thieves or criminals. Some suggest that the two thieves who were also crucified that day were part of a revolutionary political group that had great hopes of overthrowing the repressive government of Rome and bringing peace and prosperity to the nation of Israel. They may have found themselves involved in insurrection, torture, and murder; which led them to their own crosses.

There were two "Prayer Requests" were offered that day. The first thief's request was an insult hurled at the man on the cross in the middle, who might possibly be the Messiah. Be glad--that Jesus did not answer his prayer that day. He cries out, "Jesus save yourself--and us."

Years ago I was a chaplain at Rikers Island Jail and the one thing that always amazing was that nearly every prisoner in the penitentiary told me they were innocent. My Chaplain Supervisor was Father Fred Proells, a German gentleman who became an Episcopal priest, he told me that once King Frederick the Great was visiting the jails of Potsdam and speaking to the inmates. Surprisingly, every single one of the inmates expressed to the King that they were totally innocent of the charges against them. Near the end of the King's visit, one of the inmates shared with him, "My King, I am guilty and deserve the punishment I am receiving." The King ordered the man to be released. With a smile, the King said, "After all, I don't want him to corrupt all the innocent people in here."

We are all sinners here, there are no exceptions. We stand here today in need of the atoning death of Jesus Christ for our sins.

The first thief on that day failed to realize that prayers and desires for the Kingdom should be focused on God and His truth, and on His will for our lives—not on our temporary wants and needs.

Now the second thief on the cross was just as guilty as the first,-but from his conversation with Jesus, we see that he, as we psychologists like to say, had a lot insight into his life and his relationship to a Holy God. First, he admitted that he needed help--he could not save himself.

Second, he could recognize the pure, perfect character of Jesus while hanging on a cross. He recognized Jesus as the Son of God.

Third, he was able to determine that Jesus, even as he was being tortured and killed, had the power necessary to bring him into a far greater Kingdom.

And he didn't say: Jesus, IF you can bring me into your Kingdom. He cries out, Jesus; remember me when you come into your Kingdom.

And finally, this thief was one of the first people to comprehend the real reason for Jesus dying on the cross. And Jesus responds, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” And Jesus not only promises that thief immortality—but also his companionship for all eternity.

It was a deliberate act by the Roman authorities to crucify Jesus between two known criminals. It was done to further humiliate Jesus in front of the crowd. Imagine a King being mocked and killed between two thieves. But Christ was at work turning that event into one that will be known forever in the pages of History.

Surely, this powerful lesson demonstrates once again that it is never too late to turn to your life in a more positive direction.

I’ve always appreciated the rebuke that the second thief gives to the first. He cries out, “Have you no shame, don’t you fear God?”

The second thief comes without excuse. He simply says, “We are getting what we deserve: Death.

Notice also that the second thief rebukes the first, then he offers his repentance, and then he makes his own request known to Jesus. The order here is important, and his request is simple: “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” He simply said, “Jesus, remember me.”

This man only saw Jesus in one moment of his life, and that when Jesus was dying, yet by the grace and the mercy of God he was able to see more than those who had walked and talked with Jesus for years.

Another great insight that I think this story teaches is that, even in the agony and suffering of a horrible death on the cross, Jesus was not so preoccupied that he failed to hear the cry of this man’s voice.

On that historic day when Christ died, the day we call “Good Friday.” I believe the two choices are still with us today. We can respond positively to Christ on the cross; or we can reject the cross. The cross has only two sides but, there is a world of difference between them.

Where are you in the drama today? The best advice I can share with you today is to repeat the words of the penitent thief with great confidence: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”