

God has been called, 'the God of the great comeback' (Louie Giglio in his book, 'Never Too Far'). The writer anticipates our remembrance of the events of Holy Week and Easter by reflecting on the place where Jesus was crucified and the people with whom He died. The place was a landfill site. The people were thieves. Yet one of the thieves found paradise in that landfill site.

Some of us may remember the days before council recycling centres where refuse and assorted unwanted items are deposited in the correct skip in order to facilitate recycling. Sometimes there is even a shop to enable other visitors to purchase your unwanted items that seem too good to throw into a skip. There was a time when we could take our rubbish to the council tip. You could find all kinds of detritus, and the occasional treasure. As a boy I would sometimes explore a tip to see if I could find a discarded bike that was in a reasonable state of repair! Such places inevitably housed their own eco-system featuring large rodents to be avoided at all costs.

It is thought that Jesus was crucified in such a place. This is a truly horrible thought. A place of filth and refuse was also a place of shame, ignominy, and torture. It was a place where the broken bodies of the victims of harsh 'justice' were discarded like household waste. For Jesus, it was the place where love triumphed, sacrifice flourished and the will of God for the salvation of humanity was accomplished. It was a place that passers-by could not fail to see. Jesus said, "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*" (John 12:32). Crucially, this scene became the unlikely arena of redemption. Upon his request for Jesus to remember him, a thief receives Jesus' promise of Paradise.

In some traditions the Penitent Thief is called St Dismas (or Demas). He has several churches bearing his name including one built by convicts in Kingston Ontario, called The Church of the Good Thief – an interesting name for a church! In New York State there is a prison chapel dedicated to St Dismas and in Dudley, in the English Black Country, there is an Old Catholic Church bearing his name.

I am told that in the Orthodox tradition Dismas is remembered in a prayer used [before]<sup>[KB1]</sup> receiving Holy Communion: "*I will not speak of Thy Mystery to Thine enemies, neither like Judas will I give Thee a kiss; but like the thief will I confess Thee: Remember me, O Lord in Thy Kingdom.*" An ancient text contains the following couplet:

*Eden's locked gates the Thief has opened wide,  
By putting in the key, "Remember me."*

The Penitent Thief caught the attention of the playwright Samuel Beckett (he is discussed in 'Waiting for Godot'). He has been depicted by many artists, has been alluded to in at least one feature film which has a thrift shop called St Dismas which is run by crooks. He has even been a character in a computer game. William Cowper's hymn, 'There is a fountain filled with blood' mentions 'the dying thief' (verse 2).

What do you think of the Penitent Thief? In our blame culture he would never be forgiven. Even an ill-judged Tweet from many years ago can lose some people their job in today's world. Forgiveness seems to be off the agenda, and yet there is a difference between forgiveness and institutional closing of the ranks in neglect of the needs of innocent victims. Crucially, the same redemptive love that was received by Dismas was also poured out for those whom he had harmed. Indiscriminate grace to all who pray 'Remember me' is the key lesson in the story of the Penitent Thief. His was a great comeback from a wasted, selfish life into the Paradise of God. If the grace of God was available for him, will God's grace not also be on offer to you and me, to our loved ones and friends. The transformation is found at the cross of Christ where love and justice meet.

If such amazing grace was found in a rubbish dump, can we not also find God's amazing grace in the comfort of our own homes, surrounded by our treasured objects and perhaps with our dearest loved ones, despite the frustrations and limitations of lockdown? Is there anywhere we can go where God's grace cannot find us? As we read in Psalm 139: 7-10: *"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."*

May God bless you, and keep you safe,

Keith

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