

## GOOD FRIDAY COMMENTARY

*"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The sign above His head said He was a king, but He didn't look like one. He looked like me, hanging naked, His shame for all to see. His skin, scorched by the noonday sun, welts from the whips, pulled tight against His bones. His tongue was swollen. His speech was slurred, when rarely He spoke. At times the Palestinian heat robbed Him of His wits, and He appeared confused. He strained to lift His beaten body enough to breathe.

His eyes were often fixed down on His mother, with a sadness only her own eyes could match. I envied Him. My mother had long since given up on me. My sins had been too great for her to bear. She'd taken me back one too many times. I'd ignored too many of her warnings. But His mother stood at His feet, a few friends steadying her. One of His disciples was there too. He looked like he couldn't bear the sight, but he couldn't bring himself to look away either. The dying man told him to take care of His mother.

The soldiers huddled together drinking and gambling. They'd stripped Him of His clothing, five garments. Each of the four soldiers claimed one, and then they argued over the last, a seamless tunic, the kind a mother would make for her son. It was too nice to tear, the soldiers decided, and besides that, they'd heard that it had worked a miracle, and so they cast lots for it.

The chief priests and the elders lined up to mock Him. One by one they hurled their insults. Oh, the words they spoke! If I hadn't lost my faith long ago, I would have lost it then. How could they, men of God, speak to Him in such a way in His agony? Had they no compassion? I guess not, because they snarled like dogs as they taunted Him, like they wanted a hunk of His flesh. Nothing seemed to be enough to satisfy their desire for His anguish.

I'm ashamed to say it now. It hurts just to think about it. But it's only fair for you to know. I mocked Him too. The other robber and I, we mocked Him. I don't know why. It didn't ease my pain. It brought me no joy. Of all my sins, this one stings the most. But it's true.

As time wore on, though, my mind went back to something that He'd said earlier. He'd looked down on the religious leaders as they mocked Him, and He'd done so, not with a hatred to match their own, but with something else entirely, with compassion. He looked like He felt sorry for them. And then, crowned with thorns, squinting through His swollen eyes, blood streaming from the corner of His mouth, He gazed up at the heavens and prayed, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

And I don't know why, but as I thought about that, I felt something I hadn't felt in years. I felt the urge to pray. I felt like perhaps this cross could be the best thing that ever happened to me, like I could come to life as I died on this hill. I prayed. I never thought those two words would fit together, but that's what I did. I prayed. I couldn't help it. Looking at Him, with nothing to offer, not having lived an honest day in all my life, having forgotten all the Scriptures I'd learned as a child, I couldn't help but ask. Looking at Him there actually made me feel like I had to ask, as if He'd been nailed there for this moment. I prayed, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”***

**And do you know what He said? You won't believe it. I wouldn't have believed it, if there hadn't been something about His words that left me no choice. He said, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Yes, He did. He said, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

**Without thinking, I looked around to see if He was talking to someone else. He had to be. But no, He was looking at me. I looked at His mother and disciple. They simply nodded, as if they knew what I felt. “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

Not long after that He breathed His last. He said, ***“It is finished,”*** bowed His head, and gave up His spirit. And soon, I will do the same. It can't be long. Each breath brings me closer. My eyes grow heavier by the second. And do you know what? I've never been more excited in my life. I am forgiven. I am going to paradise. Me, a thief, a criminal, a fool.

What's my name? It doesn't matter. I'll tell you what, pretend it's yours. In fact, I think that's the best thing you could do on this day, this Friday, this Good Friday. Amen.