

Daily Lenten Devotional

Sunday, April 13, 2025

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40—Remember Me/ The Prayer to be Remembered



One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'
—Luke 23.39-43

pall (pɔ:l) . . . L. *pallium* pall, coverlet, curtain, cloak; a Greek cloak or mantle, the philosopher's cloak; in Tertullian, the garment worn by Christians instead of the Roman *toga*.

I. Cloth, a cloth.

1. Fine or rich cloth (as material); esp. as used for the robes of person of high rank; in OE. purple cloth.

2. A rich cloth spread over something.

3. *Eccl.* a. A cloth spread upon the altar, an altar-cloth; . . . c. A linen with which the chalice is covered.

- 4. A cloth, usually of black, purple, or white velvet, spread over a coffin, hearse, or tomb.
- II. A garment, vestment.
- 5. A robe, cloak, mantle; in early times, esp. of rich stuff.
- III. 8. *fig.* . . . Something that covers or conceals . . . and produces an effect of gloom.

There is a lovely image of eternal life conveyed in the "placing of the pall." You can see it often in a Roman Catholic funeral service where a casket is covered by a pall. The image conjured by covering the casket with the pall is this: when the deceased is gathered to judgement, in the moment when there is the measuring life's worth, the Christ steps forward and bars the way; Jesus stops you before you reach the throne so he may take off his robe and cover you, cover your broken soul. With his pall covering you, the Father sees the robe of the son, sees the one who comes to judgement as a beloved, one called and forgiven. The robe covers our brokenness. So covered the judge says, "this is my child."

Most people are unaware of what a pall is or what it is intended to convey in funerals. Most are familiar with the modern phrase, "to cast a pall" over a room or event, thereby making people sad or gloomy. Or, I imagine, people confuse "a pall" with the "appalling" which means to lose color or become ashen, to be so wrong as to lose vitality, to pale. Yet, the ancient and ecclesial uses of the words are just the opposite. A pall, in essence, covers us in grace, wraps us in "purple" or richness.

In Luke's crucifixion scene there is a dialogue of the criminals. One goads Jesus; the other prays to or pleads with him, saying, "remember me." And Jesus offers the fantastic response, "today you will be with me in paradise." Knowing the ancient definition of the pall, it is as if Jesus says, you will wear my robe today. I will vouch for you. "This one is with me; he wears my robe." Given that both men at this moment were stripped and nailed to wooden beams dying in agony, the promise changes the grotesque to the unboundedly beautiful.

And there is also in this scene an economic transaction. "We are getting what we deserve." We are paying, in essence, what we owe; Jesus has done nothing wrong, claims the criminal, he does not deserve this punishment. He does not owe anything. Yet, the greatest claim in terms of transaction or an economy of grace is the prayer: "remember me." This too carries a lack of justified measure (Jesus does not owe the criminal anything). And yet, he makes a pledge, a promise of blessing and honor: today you will be with me in Paradise.

When we speak of recognition, or knowing someone, or being known, we are using language of knowledge. To identify a person, to know their name, to understand where they come from or what makes them unique, all of this knowledge is conveyed in terms of information or understanding. Yet, what is more likely the case is we are not conveying what we know, but what we remember.

Who hasn't been in a gathering and there is a lingering sense with a stranger, something is niggling and poking at you, but you just can't place it. And then it hits and we say, "oh I know you." We remember how we met; we remember where we encountered this person. Maybe we went to school with them 30 years ago or worked together in a different life. Whatever it is a memory has risen in us and then we remember.

The opposite case is just as likely. Someone has met us, worked with us, gone to school with us and they have no memory of us. Who hasn't experienced this and been hurt or surprised or even delighted that we are not remembered. We say things like, "he doesn't have a clue who I am." In this claim we use knowledge language, "you don't know me," but we are most likely conveying matters of memory, "you don't remember me."

When we build the monument, the memorial, when we curate the museum, we can speak in terms of knowledge. We want to get the names right, get the dates right, accurately attribute the work of artists or arrange a collection so it conveys an encyclopedic presentation (e.g., Giotto is an example of early Renaissance). Yet in our building and construction, in the statues and the reliefs, in the organizing of works, what we are really doing is conjuring memory, creating a place of memory, or better still, letting memory be true and good and beautiful. We honor the accomplishment by making an offering and this keeps the memory of the dead alive; we offer gratitude to the memory of those who suffered for us and thus pay tribute to their sacrifice; we pay what we owe, "what we deserve" in the act of penance, the just punishment. In each of these we can hear the prayer of the criminal, "remember me."

The art of the sublime is conveyed in memory, not knowledge. What is true is both an accurate representation of a person or an event, a true memory, but it is also ancient memory. When we see and encounter the sublime we are in the midst of the eternal, what has always been true and always will be true. This is the great mystery offered in the claim of Jesus when says "today." The eternal will happen today. Knowledge flounders here. Memory, though, rises to the occasion.