

The Second Word: 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' Luke 23: 43

Jesus speaks of paradise to his companion in suffering, the thief on the cross. What comes to your mind when you hear that word, "paradise"? We may think of an unspoiled world, a Garden of Eden where human beings are at one with their environment, with each other, and with God. Have you ever said to yourself, in a moment when life seems beautiful: "This is paradise"? Perhaps, like Peter, John and James in the story we have just read, you have climbed a hill or mountain on a pleasant day. As you gain height, the landscape falls away into contours below and the horizon retreats into the pale blue distance, with just a billowy cloud or two to mark the boundaries of your world. It is easy to feel, with the poet Schiller: ". . . above the starry canopy a loving father must dwell." But the disciples almost slept through their glimpse of paradise. However, its light shocked them into wakefulness. The familiar praying form of Jesus now appeared to be made of light and, when Moses and Elijah appeared, it must have seemed to the now alert disciples that they were truly in paradise.

How we would love to hold on to our moments in paradise! In our family, we sometimes pore over the pictures of ourselves camping in the Rockies, canoeing on a lake, or playing with our grandchildren on a sun-warmed beach. But we know that even if we were to be instantly transported to one of those places, we might not be able to recapture the joy ... there is something elusive about our glimpses of paradise on earth. On the mount of transfiguration, Peter wanted to hold on to his particular paradise, to build tents, structures around it. We can't blame him; we would like to do the same. But instead of the permanence, the security he wanted, there came a cloud.

Have you ever been caught in a cloud on a mountaintop? It's a strange experience. One minute your world extends for many kilometres in all directions, in the next, it has shrunk to the few square metres of grass and rock that surround your feet. If you are wise, you stay put until the cloud passes. The disciples were frozen in fear and awe when the cloud overshadowed them. Then the voice: "This is my Son, my chosen: listen to him!" They became aware of a man standing alone before them; it was Jesus. The glory had passed, or had it? Perhaps it was still latent in the familiar form of their Master. A seed of understanding had been planted in their minds. Perhaps they started to understand that paradise is not necessarily a place, or even a state of mind, but simply being in the presence of Jesus and doing his will.

There seemed to be a cloud of darkness hanging over Golgotha, the place of a skull, where Jesus hung between the two thieves. "Remember me," croaks one of the thieves. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." From the darkness of that cloud of lonely suffering, Jesus promises that they will meet in paradise.

Lord, remember us also, and gives us a glimpse of yourself in our everyday lives, so that we may know you when we meet face to face in paradise.

Chris Oddy: Good Friday 2008