

Palm Sunday “Gestas and Dismas”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, the passion reading preaches itself. The drama of Holy Week has begun. Our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah begins, “The Lord has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them”. The question we can ask ourselves is: in what areas of my life can I be described rightly as “weary”? Is it at home? Is it at work? Is it in our prayer life? What areas of our lives can we rightly describe as weary? Now we can ask ourselves, what part of the passion reading are the words that will rouse us from weariness? There are so many moments to pick from. I invite us to sit down with the passion according to Luke these next few days and answer this question for ourselves because the Holy Spirit will not let us down.

There is a moment that I find particularly meaningful that is only found in the Gospel of St. Luke. It is the dialogue happening between Jesus and the two condemned men crucified with him on both sides. They are both not named, however tradition refers to the repentant criminal as Dismas and the unrepentant criminal as Gestas. The fact that they are not named however invites us to consider, how are we like these men? In what areas of my life am I like Gestas? In what areas of my life am I like Dismas? We refer to Dismas as St. Dismas because the definition of someone in heaven is, in fact, saint. Dismas qualifies, because Jesus promises him that he will be in heaven. And this is something because, by Dismas’ own admission, he says his punishment corresponds to his crimes. His repentance however is reflected in his prayer of abandonment, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” Jesus responds, “Amen, I say to you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.”

Of course, St. Dismas can also represent all of humanity. We all face the certainty of dying someday. Jesus can therefore be seen as speaking to all who trust in him his pledge of salvation and eternal life. Tying back to Isaiah’s promise of a word that can lift us from spiritual weariness, I think it is helpful to spend some time reflecting on the examples of Gestas and St. Dismas. How are we like them? How can we avoid closing our hearts like Gestas in favor of opening our hearts like St. Dismas?

When are the times in life that you feel like you are carrying a heavy cross? When are the times in life that you feel crucified, perhaps even justifiably? When are the times in life when we feel weary? During Holy Week, we are encouraged to feel God’s mercy, not just to think about God’s mercy. We are invited to experience God’s mercy in our lives. When we find ourselves crucified in life, we encounter a God who, far from abandoning us, wants to be crucified right next to us if that is where we find ourselves. In fact, this week we encounter a God who wants to be crucified for us, in our place for the sake of our salvation.

My friends, let’s make this week Holy by allowing the mercy of God to touch our hearts. Let’s make this a retreat experience for you and your loved ones this week. The Sacred Triduum begins on Holy Thursday at 7PM, continues on Friday at 7 PM and concludes with the Easter Vigil next Saturday at 8:30 PM. I invite us to make this week Holy by opening our hearts to God’s mercy in every area of our lives and share this love to the people around us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.