

Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10: 16-25; John 18: 1-19:42

What's in a name? According to Juliet in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Act II, Scene 2).

What's in a name? Many of us spend a lot of time as prospective parents thinking about names for our unborn babies. Sometimes the name reflects our history, our heritage, our location. Sometimes the name reflects a fondness for a particular actor or movie or play. How many of us have, at one time or another, looked up what our name means in another language. It's part of knowing who we are. Or maybe we don't like the name we've been given by our parents and we look for a different name by which we want to be known. Nicknames abound and in some circumstances become the bond between friends, soldiers in a specific unit or in the workplace. All different kinds of reasons for the name by which the world knows us.

Today is the day that the name of Jesus really began to reach out into the wider world. If not for the crucifixion, Easter would not exist. If not for Jesus's life and ministry, the church would not exist. Jesus becomes the name that gives us hope despite the awful things that happened this day.

It is in the name of Jesus that we so often pray. It is in the name of Jesus that we see our course in life as we look for a way to connect with the God who created us. It is Jesus that walks beside us when life's slings and arrows are all around us.

We generally focus today on Jesus – and that's appropriate. Perhaps, though, we ought to also focus on the two bandits or criminals who were also crucified with Jesus. The Gospel of John, from which we just read simply says: "There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them." Thus we have the images of three crosses – Jesus and the two others. But no dialog between Jesus and the two others.

It is only in the Gospel of Luke that we have the words that I suggest merit our attention today. From Luke, chapter 23, beginning at verse 32:

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." ... 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." (NRSV)

What words of compassion from Jesus, even from the cross. A prayer for forgiveness to those who crucified him. And a reaching out and promise of salvation to one crucified with him, one who acknowledged that he deserved his fate on that cross.

Those two bandits. One remains focused on his own suffering- deriding Jesus while asking Jesus to save him. His self-preoccupation keeps him from acknowledging who Jesus really is. The second bandit recognizes and responds to Jesus in a completely different way. This bandit rebukes the first and acknowledges that Jesus has done nothing wrong. And recognizing Jesus

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for who he is – the Son of God, the Messiah – he asks Jesus to remember him. I wonder if Jesus found comfort of a sort, hanging on the cross and in horrible pain, in having this second bandit ask to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom. A kingdom not on earth but in heaven.

Ben Helmer writes that “the only reason Jesus could go to the cross was because he dared to walk into the darkness... That means leaving a lot of things behind, including the world’s wisdom for how to live in the darkness by making everything pleasant for ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus prayed in the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed alone in the darkness time after time. Jesus prayed that the cup be taken from him and yet, “not my will but yours be done.” A life of service to others becomes the perfect freedom.

We are the two bandits. We are the ones justly accused, tried and convicted of living a life that does not always have at its center God, Jesus and the love for each other that is so necessary to create a loving world where all have what they need. Note, need and not necessarily want. Even so, not all have their basic needs met. We notice the gaps and too often we judge and condemn rather than seeking ways to help people become self-sufficient. And, it is critically important that when we do seek to help, our help is in ways that respects the dignity of the other; that our help is not toxic and demeaning – something that builds us up rather than something that helps the other learn to become what God has created them to be. It is important that we seek ways to help people know the love and peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

And hopefully, at least at times, we are the second bandit. We have moments when we see and know Jesus for who he truly is. And we ask for forgiveness and mercy. We don’t deserve it but God offers us pardon despite our shortcomings. God offers us love despite the times we fail to love one another as He has loved us. Jesus waits patiently on the cross today – and every day. Jesus waits patiently for us to understand ourselves as the second bandit – rightly accused, tried and convicted and now waiting to die. Jesus prays, even in his own agony, that we will turn to Him, ask for forgiveness and ask to be remembered.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.  
Jesus, remember me when you come in to your kingdom.

Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Helmer in “Sermons that Work” 2018.

<sup>2</sup> © 1981, Les Presses de Taizé, GIA Publications, Inc.