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Lenten and Easter Meditation: Voices of the Passion: Dismas, 1944

O.P. Kretzmann
Valparaiso University

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DISMAS

Our speaker this evening is one of the nameless immortals in the history of the human race. He is important only because he typifies an array of human experience, a certain truth, and some lessons which our forgetful age must learn all over again. Despite the fact that his name is known to us only by tradition, he has a right to speak in a Christian church. His significance rests in his universality. As we listen to him we hear the voices of nameless and forgotten millions who bears the real burdens of the world. They are the really important men and women in human history. Their mistakes and tears are our very own. They carry significant lessons also for us.

Our speaker is known in the history of the Church as the good thief or the penitent thief. Tradition has it that his name was Dismas. Ecclesiastical calendars have set aside March 25th as his day. About twenty years ago there was a remarkable revival of interest in him created largely by a Chicago journalist. During the past ten years several churches, all of them within prison walls, have been named after him. That is about all we know of Dismas except -- and it is a heavenly exception -- for the fact that one day about noon he said nine words to God on a Cross which sum up everything that the human heart can ever say to the Eternal. They bring Heaven nearer than the sound of a whisper in a quiet room. Let us listen attentively as Dismas speaks!

I do not imagine that you of the twentieth century are very much interested in my life. Certainly I should not trouble you with the details. Let me just tell you a few things which are so universal that there must be someone in this church to whom my experience may be of value, either as a warning or as an example.

You know me only as a dying man on a cross. You must remember, however, that there were many years before that Friday afternoon. As I look back upon them, I

should like to tell you that it was very easy for me to go wrong. Like everything else in life, the journey into evil is a gradual process. It does not come suddenly. Step by step I went down into darkness and the first step was the hardest. When I committed my first crime I was frightened but I soon got over that. It was so easy! It was easy to live outside the law, to get by with things, to regard myself as the great exception to the law of crime and punishment. Others I knew had been caught, but I was sure that I would escape. Somehow, I believed, I would get by. I was the special case to whom the rules of life did not apply. That was my first mistake.

Then came my second error. Because I got by with doing wrong I began to think wrong. You believe that action follows thought. It is well to remember that action often precedes thought. Because we do wrong we begin to think wrong. Here, I suspect, I come very close to the twentieth century, especially to the younger generation. I thought I was free to do as I pleased. Nobody was going to tell me what to do. No parents, no law, no God were going to control my action. I thought, as your whole world of the twentieth century things, that freedom meant the right to violate all the laws of God and man, that I could live as I pleased; that I was free to go after all the money I could get, all the pleasure I could find and all the power I could reach.

And -- this is my tragedy -- I continued to think that until the very last minute. During my entire trial I was still hopeful. Something had always happened when I was in trouble. Surely it would happen this time too. When the judge pronounced the word "guilty", and when they dragged me out to the hill beyond the gates, I was still hoping against hope. Surely there would be a last minute reprieve! Something would happen to save me.

Something did happen! They laid me down on a cross, took my right hand, placed it on the cross-beam and started to drive a nail through it. With the first flash of blinding, tearing pain I knew I was through. This was the end!

Suddenly I saw my life, now and at last, in one piece. The nail was tying things together. I saw all that I might have been and all that I had become. I saw the shame, the folly, the failure, the futility of my years. This was, as you say in the twentieth century, the pay-off! The drops of blood from my hands and my feet and the feverish agony of creeping death were the last result of my faithless years.

That is my story until nine o'clock on that Friday morning. Are you interested in its meaning? Your pastors/^{I understand,} are taught to preach the Law and the Gospel. Well, this is the Law! The soul that sinneth it shall die! The scales of justice may be off balance for a long time but they always return to normal again. God may not balance His books everyday, but in the end He always does. You can get by with many things for many days but in the end life and time and God catch up with you. They are all moving in one direction together and there is no getting away from them. Under the sun of the unheeding sky, this is the Law!

I hope you will not think that I am telling you this in order to frighten you into leading a good life. Fear is a poor and rotten foundation for goodness. That is why your pastors tell you that the Law cannot save anybody. I know that now. I am telling you all this only because I would like to have you understand clearly what happened to me on that Good Friday. Unless you begin to feel my desperation and my loneliness, the utter hopelessness of my stricken soul, you will not be able to follow the events of the next three hours.

Three of us were hanging on three crosses standing sharp against the blue sky of an April morning. Some of you have learned in these days of pain and separation and tears that the human heart and body can accustom itself to almost everything. After the first sharp, stabbing pain of the nails had become steady and before the last fever had begun, I had a chance to look around. It struck me that this was not the usual crowd which gathered at crucifixions to witness the black human impulse which seems to take pleasure in the suffering of others.

Outwardly this crowd seemed to be of a higher type. There were some important looking people there. I saw some priests, Scribes and Pharisees. I noticed, too, that they paid no attention to us but were concentrating on the Cross in the center. That interested me. I shook my head to clear away the fog of pain. I heard them cursing, jeering and mocking. They seemed to have a personal bitter hatred for the Man on the Cross in the center. Apparently they considered His suffering a personal triumph for themselves. The crowd, I suddenly saw, was a mob, a yelling, jeering, inhuman, single animal, a snarling brotherhood of hate.

With a tremendous effort I turned my head and looked at the Man on the Cross in the center. I was curious about Him. Then something happened! Please do not ask me just exactly what it was. It has happened a million times since that Friday morning and no one has yet been able to explain it in human terms. "For those who believe in God no explanation is necessary; for those who do not believe in God no explanation is possible." All I know is that I saw in Him the exact opposite of everything that I was and everything that I believed. I saw in Him a goodness which I did not believe existed in my cynical world, the measureless dignity of suffering power, the quiet waiting for a victorious end.

My eyes turned upward to the inscription above His thorn-crowned head: "Jesu Nazarene, Rex Iudaeorum." Suddenly I knew that that inscription was true. Somebody had inadvertently stumbled on the truth. He was a King! He was a King in exile going home, brave banners down a suppliant from pain, and yet a King Whose Kingdom, I thought, would be a wonderful place to live, a land of peace, joy and glory.

For a moment, I must admit, I thought of asking Him to take me when He would be ready to go, but I dismissed that thought immediately. There was no chance of that. Heaven after a life like mine? I, Dismas, in the company of angels and archangels? No that was too much to hope. I knew I had no future and no chance. I was getting what was coming to me. The thing to do, I thought, was

to take it and die.

And yet I wanted to say something to Him. I wanted Him to know that I believed in Him. I wanted Him to know that I knew that He had a future, that He was no going to die without hope as I was dying, that for Him the rest was not silence but song and life and victory. I wanted Him to know that He had a friend in the crowd who would be more than satisfied with anything that He might want to give.

And so, you will recall, I turned to Him and whispered: "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom!" I knew it was a small thing and a great thing to ask, beyond tears and beyond time, the old, old human cry, the longing never to be stilled in heaven in a heart like mine, that somewhere and some time, when life is said and done someone might remember us, think back to us and pay to our fading memory the tribute of a passing thought. I did not want to be forgotten!

You remember what happened then. He turned and looked at me; "Today" - the word fell on my heart confident and triumphant, unshadowed by any doubt or fear. I knew I would be with Him forever. He gave me more, infinitely more, than I had asked. That night we came to the gates of Paradise. King and thief, the judge and the sinner, God with His man and man with his God. We who had met at the crossroads of our ways of sorrow went on beyond the sunset into a new and eternal morning. I was redeemed!

That is your religion. That is your faith. That is your hope. If you have seen that you need not be afraid of anything. In life or in death you are safe. Better than I, you Christians must know today that He will always be with you. I ask you to join me in saying to Him:

"Thy arms will strengthen me; and I know
That somehow I shall follow when you go
To the still land beyond the Evening Star
Where everlasting hills and valleys are
And evil shall not hurt me anymore
And terror shall be past, and grief and war."

I learned that at three o'clock one Friday afternoon and it is still a wonderful thing to know.