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Lenten Meditation: The Memory of the Cross, n.d.

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THE MEMORY OF THE CROSS

It has been said that a man's final character and worth can be judged most accurately by observing his contacts with strangers, with those whom the tides of life throw across his path only for a brief moment and from whom he can expect no service and no favors. From this point of view the study of the life and conversations of Jesus presents an amazing contrast to the coldness and heartlessness with which we in the Twentieth century so often greet human souls whose lives and problems touch ours for only a moment. Think for a moment of the tenderness with which He greeted the woman of Samaria at the well---of the patience with which He spoke to Nicodemus in the middle of the night --- of all the love and sympathy which He poured down upon the crippled, heartsick and fever-torn souls whom He met in His wanderings over the hills of Galilee and the plains of Judea. No problem was too small, no sin was too great, no human soul was too blasted for Him to pause for a moment in His blessed way and pour the light of heaven into the dark, hidden corners of the wrecked lives whose weary journey touched His on the way from Bethlehem to Calvary.

And he carried this with Him even to the Cross. Here at the crossroads of the world and the meeting place of the eyes, here where He was engaged in the last conflict over all the souls of men, here where He was bringing into final harmony the three greatest facts of life - the love of God, the power of the law and the deadliness of sin--here we would not expect Him to pause for a moment and touch a single human soul for whom the gates of hell were opening wide. And yet He does-- and we have here on the Cross His last conversation with one of those that passed Him as a ship in the night. The dying thief on the cross to the right speaks: "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." And the answer comes--swift, sure--transforming darkness into light, hell into heaven -- and sweeping with it over into eternity a human being from whom hope had fled and death meant only darkness: "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

A few years ago I spoke in this Church on the second part of this conversation-- a conversation which ties together finally and forever sin and salvation, life and death, time and eternity. Today I am more interested in the first part: Lord remember me. Remember Me? Was that the proper thing to ask? Would it not have been better for the dying thief to ask Jesus to forget--to forget all the cruel and bloody past -- to forget how He had spent all his blasted years in hurling the atoning Christ out of his life--to forget all about him and go into eternity with no memory of any man whose blood had dripped into the same dust? Was he not taking a fearful chance? Yes, he was--but it was the chance that faith always takes. He was asking Jesus to remember--not his sins--not his past--not all the fever-torn years--but him--his own immortal, bloodbought and Christ-redeemed soul. Lord remember me! Four hundred years earlier the old prophet Nehemiah had closed the last book of the Old Testament with the moving words: "Remember me, o my God for good" -- And now here-- at the end of the road from Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained--a sinstricken, hell-bound human soul suddenly realizes that when death comes and the gates of eternity are yawning wide there is only one thing to say: Lord remember me!

There is a very old legend in the Eastern Church which tells us that this was not the first time the Lord Jesus and the robber had met. 32 years earlier when the Holy Family had fled from the wrath of Herod they had gone from Jerusalem to Jericho by the famous Bloody Way, the road which is described in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It was infested with thieves who found hiding places in the rocks along the road. Here when night fell Joseph and Mary and the Baby Jesus found refuge in one of the robber's caves. The robber's wife, seeing the infant Christ in His mother's arms rushed forward crying and pointed to her own little baby wasting away on a pile of sheepskins in the corner of the cave. While the two mothers were

talking the infant Christ stretched out His hand toward the dying baby in the corner - and instantly health came back to that little twisted body - the cheeks grew rosy once more - and the happy mother clasped her child to her heart in gratitude and wonder. 32 years later the two babies met again--now two young men hanging on two crosses outside the gates of Jerusalem. The legend may not be true--but it is a strangely terrible and truthful picture of the lives of many men and women in the world today. Somewhere--sometime in their childhood the infant Christ touched them--perhaps in Baptism--perhaps through the hands of a pious father and mother--perhaps through the blessed story of Christmas. And then the cruel and marching years have brought them a robber's career - a life of robbing God of His glory--of robbing the Church of the loyalty--of robbing Christ of an immortal soul that once belonged to Him. And today I tell you they are crucified--crucified by their own sin on a cross of pain--on a cross of gold--on a cross of misery and uncertainty and doubt. And as with the dying thief on the cross two thousand years ago so also for them today on their own cross of God-forgotten shame there is only one hope--only one solution--only one way out--a lift of the head--a moving of the life--and the dying cry of a dying man to the dying Savior: Lord remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.

And He does remember. There is the blessed and beautiful Memory of the Cross. He never forgets. His memory is eternal. A long time ago His voice came to the dying thief "Today thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." -- and today it comes to every sinburdened and sinladen soul that asks Him in God-illuminated and God-inspired faith: "Lord remember me." When all is said and done the Cross is a strange mixture of forgetting and remembering. In the seven blessed words the first and second word already present this contrast. The first "Father forgive them" shows us the eternal Son of God pleading with His father to forget. // Forgiveness is forgetfulness--and the people who say today "I can forgive but I cannot forget" do not know what forgiveness means. // Forgiveness means forgetting--the complete and eternal blotting out of the burden and guilt and the memory of sin, the final hurling of it into the bottomless sea of the pity of God. And the memory of the Cross ~~of~~ is just as complete and final. It means that you will be remembered-body and soul-for time and for eternity.

"Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise." How often since that first Good Friday has He whispered these words--whispered them when we did not hear. Death often comes to us a sudden surprise and shock--and yet if we had but ears to hear we should have heard Him say again and again "Today" Yesterday morning, this morning, tomorrow morning--here is a child smiling in its sleep--here is a business man bending over his desk--here is a weary sufferer who has tossed all night in fever, and to all of them ~~the~~ He comes: "Today" etc. He knows when we are to die and the strange tenderness with which we look on a fading face is reflection of His thought always and forever He says these words in mercy to those whom He has redeemed and called by His name. He said them in mercy to the dying thief--and I pray God that He will say them in mercy also to you. No more punishment, no more shame, no more temptation, no more conflict with sin: "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise." The same hammers that nailed them--the Sinless and the sinner--to the cross smote the Everlasting Doors and they were opening. Before night came Jesus and the soul which God had given Him again entered into the eternal Day and the eternal open world "where there shall be no more sorrow or crying, neither pain, for God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." My dear friend--the dying Savior and the dying thief--they are good company for you--today, tomorrow, and forever.