

My name is – Dismas. Certainly not a very popular name – although occasionally you might have a man choose it at the time of his profession in a religious community.

Not a lot is known about me – and much of what is known about me – is only through tradition, rather than historical fact.

For instance, there is a tradition that holds that I first met this man Jesus in a cave when we were both children.

His family was on their way to Egypt fleeing the wrath of King Herod – and my family was on the lam, fleeing from the law – as thievery is kind of in my genes.

The story is told that I was sick – and Jesus cured me physically.

There is another tradition that identifies me as the wayward son of Anna – the prophetess found only at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel – who was present in the Temple when Mary and Joseph came there for the purification rituals following the birth of Jesus.

Anna was said to have never left the temple, she worshipped there night and day with fasting and prayer. It is said she was praying for me, desiring my return to her – which sounds just like a mother – but if this be true – it would make me a pretty old man by now.

This tradition of being Anna’s son – makes for nice bookends to St. Luke’s Gospel: the mercy and compassion Anna prays for at the beginning of the Gospel – is finally granted at the very end of the Gospel:

For I am one of those hanging next to Jesus on the cross --- I am Dismas, the good thief – who is never named in any of the Gospels – but at least gets to speak in Luke’s Gospel.

For that one day – I considered myself the luckiest man on earth. Well, for just a few minutes of that one day – but that’s all it takes. But I’m getting a little ahead of myself.

The sign above him that day said it all: This is the King of the Jews. And that’s why the rulers and soldiers present that day, and even the other criminal hanging with us – jeered at him: “**IF** you are the king of the Jews, then save yourself” they shouted.

For kings are supposed to be powerful people. In their hands lie the destiny of many. Kings live in large palaces, amass great wealth and great armies, servants wait on them hand and foot.

If this man truly is a king --- then where is his kingdom --- where are his armies --- where is his throne??

Why I was close to jeering at him myself – until I thought: what do I have to lose? I’m hours, if not minutes away from death. . . what’s it going to matter if I take the chance that he is who he says he is??

But then I thought: who am I to ask for help? I wasted my life. I was never much of a believer in anything – much less a Messiah. I’m not even Jewish!

So there I was naked, desolate, hopeless, and lost. All I had left – was a prayer --- but that’s all I really needed!

And so I took the chance and spoke those words – the most important words I ever uttered in my life: “Jesus, remember me – when you come into your kingdom.”

And then he said the words that made me the luckiest man on earth: “Amen, I say to you – today you will be with me in paradise.”

Music to my ears – but more importantly – music to my soul. It was then that I felt a great weight lifted from me. The weight of all the disappointments, all the failures, all the sins that I had carried all of my life – were suddenly healed and forgiven and lifted. For this man, this king – reigning gloriously from the throne of his cross --- had MERCY on me!

Right to the very end of his life – to his very last breath – he was doing what he was sent to do: seeking out those who are lost, embracing those who are in pain, including those who are excluded. Even as he dies, he is reaching out in welcome: to welcome the weak to make them strong. To welcome the worthless to make them worth-while. To welcome the sinful to make them pure!

*And that's what he challenges his followers to do!*

And I hear over the years some have been successful at it – and some haven't. I hear that some who call themselves his followers still think that those who are the most powerful – are the ones with the most money, or the most bombs, or who are the most intimidating – or the best at keeping others in their place.

These so-called followers of Jesus fail to see that real strength is found in tenderness and mercy. That real power is found in kindness and forgiveness. That real thrones of glory are held by those who watch out for the most vulnerable, the most forgotten, the most excluded.

I considered myself that day the luckiest man on earth – because I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Crucified right next to the one they call Jesus: Jesus of Nazareth – the king of the Jews.

But don't think I was saved by luck. NO, I was saved by faith. It had nothing to do with me, except for my repentance --- and it had everything to do with him.

My advice to you would be: open your hearts and your lives to him right here, right now.

Allow him to move in and take possession of your heart, your will, your soul. For we are saved by grace, we live by grace, we pray by grace. Make this Jesus of Nazareth your lord and king.

Take the coming days of Advent to do what is important: to quiet your hearts and your lives – to listen and to wait – and to fall in love with Jesus all over again.