

Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

It's such a breathtaking moment, imagining ourselves standing below these giant crosses and hearing Jesus speak these words. Everything Jesus says from the cross feels like it needs to be honored with silence and awe.

Of course, if we had been there on the day, instead of silence and awe, we would have been hearing taunts, and jeers; perhaps people threw things.

And these three men. Perhaps everyone who gathered to see the spectacle or who passed by (the place of execution was by the side of a road - visibility thought to act as a deterrent; and as a way to turn up the heat on the humiliation and shame.) perhaps those seeing this sight had no idea who they were seeing. Each of the crucified with faces tight from the pain; each of them dirty with sweat dripping down their faces and chests. None of them was dressed so as to be identified. Even the sign over Jesus' head, "The King of the Jews" was probably not a title that gave away much. I suspect written taunts of this type were common.

Three men in agony, their arms seeming to stretch as the day lingers. A few words pass between them, perhaps not easily overheard on the ground amidst the yelling. In answer to something the one to the left, or maybe it was the right, in answer to him Jesus says, "truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This is one of the few times Jesus confirms for us that there is a place beyond this one; that there is a place where we will go that somehow fits the description of Paradise.

Perhaps you have a notion of paradise, Jesus' kingdom - even if you don't believe in an afterlife. There is the cartoon, tongue in cheek description of people in long white robes standing on clouds having been invited in by St. Peter. There's this cartoon from the New Yorker with what appears to be a middle aged married couple standing on a cloud and the wife is saying to the husband, "I don't know. I just feel we'd know more people in hell."

As often as I've seen that cloud based representation I've never pondered what type of existence there was to be had there. It doesn't fit my concept of paradise - if for no other reason that there appears to be no place to sit down.

So, paradise. Is it conceivable that each one of us would have our wildest dreams of a perfect life laid out before them? Could there be acre after acre of golf courses, or pen after pen of puppies and baby pigs and tiny goats? Could I sing like Will or dance like Laurie? Could you be six feet tall and I a diminutive 5'2"? This is kind of fun, I could go on and on naming key elements of paradise as I guess them.

I love to travel to the United Kingdom. Had anyone asked me I would have said that, those trips were my paradise. We've been there a lot. We reminisce sometimes

about the glorious view in the Lake District or the time we sat on the cliffs of Cornwall watching seals swimming far below us. It always surprises me that such a small bit of land can have so many different terrains. We've been thinking about planning a trip there this summer. When I started trying to plan an itinerary I found my heart racing and my palms dampening. Should we go to the North, to the Southwest or to the Brecon Beacons in Wales? Should we try to revisit where we already know and love or should we head for new territory; but what if we don't like the new? What if we've decided for 4 days in London and they have those days of 104 degrees? Still convinced this was my paradise, I was experiencing anxiety just thinking about it. Maybe I don't know what Paradise is.

I know, well I'm pretty sure, there are no golf courses or thatched roof cottages. Paradise, I'm pretty sure is not an amusement park, not a place with more to do than time to do it, more to eat than room in your stomach, more to see than eager children or lagging adults can manage. Is it possible that we have been saturated with what we believe to be our every wish, our every need; that we are no longer susceptible to Paradise? Or is it possible that Jesus knows what paradise is and we do not? Is it possible that Paradise is the opposite of an amusement park?

Is it possible that instead of juggling cotton candy, a giant stuffed bear and an orange drink in a paper cup, is it possible that paradise is only paradise because we shed things - not material things but still things that weigh us down just as surely as carnival chokies?

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. Jesus gives us a glimpse in these words. The first person to follow Christ into paradise is a thief, 2 thieves most likely. Is that what we are to expect - the unwashed, the immoral, the illiterate, the cruel, liars and crooked politicians? What kind of paradise can we imagine being formed from such raw material?

Is it possible that paradise means: being welcomed by a couple of thieves and recognizing ourselves in their eyes.

Is it possible paradise means:

No longer having an outward appearance to judge people by - is that cool stubble or homeless stubble?

no longer deciding who is friend and who is enemy,

No longer living the lie of being more than or the shame of being less than.

No longer weighed down by the pressure to constantly move forward

No longer comparing or winning or losing

No longer having to prove yourself

No longer wondering who you will eat with in the cafeteria

No longer wearing the wrong thing or the right thing

No longer being late

No time - no time pressure or time weighing heavily on our hands

No longer weighing our need against another's; no longer experiencing another as other; no longer being alone; no longer wanting to be alone.

Is it possible that paradise means no longer having to make decisions; no longer wanting to make decisions -

Is it possible that Lent is a little glimpse of paradise, the invitation to give something up - not for discipline but for the gift of one less thing. The gift of having one category, one thing, removed from the busy record playing in your head.

The death of fred clifton 11/10/84 - age 49 by Lucille Clifton

I seemed to be drawn
to the center of myself
leaving the edges of me
in the hands of my wife
and I saw with the most amazing
clarity
so that I had not eyes but sight,
and, rising and turning
through my skin,
there was all around not the
shapes of things
but oh, at last, the things
Themselves.

Not the shapes of things but oh, at last, the things themselves. Is it possible that the only shape we will encounter in paradise, the only shape that makes it paradise, is Jesus, himself. And is it possible, and it is possible, it is promised that meeting and merging with Jesus is paradise and what else can paradise be but love, such love that all difference and distinction fall away and that what remains is the essence, your essence, the truth of you - loving, yes, and an even deeper truth, being loved and believing it fully for the first time.

Truly, I tell you, someday, one day, you will be with me in Paradise. It is so. Amen.
So be it.