

## A706\_Wednesday after Palm Sunday Sermon 1

### Sermon of St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. – On the Good Thief (Lk 23:42)

"Lord, remember me when you shall come into your kingdom," (Lk 23:42)

The sermon yesterday was about the just condemnation of Judas. Today the sermon will be about the just salvation of the thief. Yesterday the sermon was about the instrumental cause of the passion of Christ, which was the traitor Judas. Today, however, it shall be about the final cause of the passion of Christ, which was that all men who were born and nurtured and lived on earth should have the glory of Paradise. But first, let the Virgin Mary be hailed.

"Lord, remember..." The text set forth as the basis of our sermon is a certain prayer which the thief offered, and it is of great efficacy. And that you might see and understand the efficacy of this utterance, it must be known that the prayer which is more pleasing and agreeable to God, and more fitting and beneficial for a man, is when one asks for the kingdom of God. The reason is twofold. First, because such a petition is concordant with the final purpose for which God created man. The final cause for which God created man is that he have the glory of Paradise, and that the ruin of the Angels be repaired. About this see the Master of the Sentences [Peter Lombard], in [II, dist.1, c. 4](#): Why did God wish to create man? He did not make us that we would remain ultimately in this world. But that we come to the glory of Paradise. Nor can anything but mortal sin take this goal from man; neither poverty, nor riches, nor pain, nor misery, nor health, nor sickness, but only mortal sin. And so on Judgment Day Christ says to those who were without sin, "Come, you blessed of my father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," (Mt 25:34). Note, "blessed," because mortal sin makes a man cursed; "from the foundation of the world," that is creation, or ordination. And so it is understood thus, "from the foundation," the eternal ordination. Behold, here is the final cause why God made man, and so to request the kingdom of God pleases God much, because it both agrees with and concurs with the divine plan.

The second reason is, because such a petition includes and presupposes every other petition. It is a good prayer to seek humility, chastity, or the mercy of God, but all of these are included in the petition for the kingdom of God, where no proud man enters, no avaricious man, nor sinners, etc., unless they do penance; nor infidels unless they be converted. Also it is good to request final perseverance in a good life, but that too is included in the petition for the kingdom of God, because it given only to those who persevere in a good life. And so Christ in Luke 12 and Matthew 6: "Seek... first the kingdom of God, and his justice," (Mt 6:33).

It is clear, therefore, that his special petition was more pleasing to God for a twofold reason, and that it is beneficial for men to ask for the kingdom of God. That thief who was crucified at the right hand of Christ did not ask Christ for bodily freedom, nor for revenge on his enemies, but he sought the kingdom of God saying, "Lord, remember me.." This short prayer was of such efficacy that he gained the kingdom of heaven. Nowhere do we read that that he ever did anything good, neither fasting, nor almsgiving, nor pilgrimage, nor prayers, but only this short prayer, by which he obtained salvation. The theme is clear.

Note that in sacred Scripture there are found three ways of gaining the kingdom of heaven:

- Some purchase the kingdom of heaven strictly,
- Some steal it secretly,
- Some find it by chance.

And in this third way this thief gained it. On the road he found the kingdom of God, when he said to Christ, "'Lord, remember me when you shall come into your kingdom," (Lk 23:42)

## I SOME PURCHASE THE KINGDOM STRICTLY

First, I say that some buy the kingdom of God strictly, by paying a just price. In this way the holy martyrs gain the kingdom of God, because for it they bore persecutions, tribulations, torments, and finally death. Do not understand that a martyr pays a just price of equal or equivalent value, but rather a proportionate and fitting [price], because no kind of punishment of the martyrs would be a just price, not for even one hour of being in Paradise, such is the excellence of this glory. And so the Apostle, who saw this glory, said: "The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us," (Rom 8:18). "...are not worthy to be compared," namely through a quality or equivalence, but they are worthy through a proportion or fittingness, because by that a person gives to God greater worldly goods, temporal and corporeal goods, body and life, as did the holy martyrs, and so then it is fitting that God gives to them greater goods which are in another world, the heavenly kingdom. This is the proportion and fittingness, as if Christ says, "Give me that which you have according to your power, and I will give to you what I have according to my magnificence."

About this proportion or justice Christ says, "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," (Mt 5:10). He is speaking literally about martyrs. And by persecution, he includes all the tribulations and sufferings of the martyrs. Note, "for justice' sake." Christ does not limit our merit only to the truth of faith, but in a wider sense those who die for maintaining any virtue whatever, become martyrs. For each and every virtue may be called justice. "All my words are just," (Prov 8:8), that is, all virtues are justice. Hence St. John the Baptist is a martyr. Hence, the church calls him Proto-martyr [praepotens], and yet he was not killed for maintaining the faith, but for his virtue of chastity and honesty. The same with St. Duilla, handmaid of a certain knight, about whom we read in the calendar on the vigil of Christmas. If Christ had said, "Blessed are those who suffer persecution because of their faith," the aforesaid would not have been martyrs. The same for St. Thomas of Canterbury, who was killed not for his faith, but for maintaining the freedom of the Church, and is nevertheless considered a martyr. The same too about the brother of St. Thomas Aquinas, who in defense of the church reprimanded the Emperor, on account of which he was killed and made a martyr, according to what St. Thomas had revealed. And so for many others. Behold why he says "for justice' sake," and not for faith. And the other authorities agree which say, "if also you suffer any thing for justice' sake," (1 Pet 3:14).

Oh, in this way many can have a good place in Paradise, by maintaining justice or virtues. But in this age, it seems that the prophecy is already fulfilled, "There is none who calls upon justice, neither is there anyone who judges truly: but they trust in a mere nothing, and speaks vanities: they have conceived labor, and brought forth in iniquity. They have broken the eggs of asps, and have woven the webs of spiders," (Isa 59:4-5). "There is none who calls upon justice," that is justice does not have an advocate, just as great lords who in their own village or court have their advocate, and estate manager, I.e. the money manager, who diligently represents them and makes purchases for them from that modest pension, that is, for a moderate price. But God does not have advocates, nor procurators in his negotiations, because, "there is none who calls upon justice." Reason, because they do not immediately see the pension, that is the price. O blessed would he be who would want to be procurator and advocate of Christ against notorious sins which touch on the honor of God. But no one cares! All are sleeping in regards to these things which are of God. But should someone act against an earthly lord, immediately he gets himself a procurator, who defends the lord. O cursed men! Is not the glory of Paradise of a greater price than the whole world? And nevertheless if the rights or the returns of a lord are infringed,

or a possession of the lord, the advocate immediately defends him. But when the divine rights or returns, are touched, for example in observing a feast day in court, no one cares or defends them. Note "eggs of asps," which are deadly, stand for notorious sins, which are deadly, the poison within corrupting and destroying community. These eggs are broken by ordinances and proclamations with punishments against notorious sins. But the prophet said, "they have woven the webs of spiders," which catch and hold small flies, but not big birds. So the ordinations which you now make, catch and hold only the simple folks and poor laborers, but not the great citizens and knights and barons. And the rulers say, "Maybe, when I am out of office, you might make me a gift of a good sword." Rather an ordination ought to be like the net of a fisherman, which is the opposite of a spider's web, because it takes and keeps big fish, and lets the little ones escape. It should be the same for ordinations, because they ought to correct the greater sins, and then the lesser ones are kept under control [*retinentur sub virga*]. And if for this reason some of the rulers are persecuted, or killed. This is the payment promised by God for this: "The just shall live for evermore: and their reward is with the Lord,... therefore shall they receive a kingdom of glory, and a crown of beauty at the hand of the Lord: for with his right hand he will cover them, and with his holy arm he will defend them," (Wis 5:16-17). Behold, the first way of gaining Paradise.

## II SOME STEAL THE KINGDOM

The second way of gaining the kingdom of God is by secretly stealing it, a pious and blessed theft. Hence, it must be known, that thieves or robbers secretly go to the house of the rich to rob it. In this way people who in this world do penance secretly, gain the kingdom of God, fearing like thieves, lest they be heard or perceived, or that they be discovered. And so, secretly, they undertake many fasts, give alms, and many other good deeds. Nothing is perceived externally. Underneath, they wear a hair shirt; and outside they sport splendid clothing. They sleep on the ground; they rise at night for prayer. So they steal the kingdom of God secretly, because no one knows their good works, until they are in another world, and then it is said, "Can it be that he was so religious? Or how much penance did he do!"

It is the same for priests and laity. About these Augustine says, when he heard of St. Anthony's reputation for sanctity, "The unlearned arise and take heaven by force, and we with our learning, and without heart, too, we wallow in flesh and blood!" (Augustine, *Confessions*, 8). Note, "they take heaven by force," that is, secretly, through works of penance. "And we," just talk, and don't do. "Arise," really suggests the manner which thieves use when they wish to break into a fortress. They arise at night, and they observe the guards, and they scale the walls secretly, in silence, however high they may be, because otherwise the [guards] would cry out. So those persons doing penance arise at night, and secretly scale the walls of Paradise, ascending by the ladder of penance, the rungs of which are penitential works. The ladder may be a certain virtue, so its rungs are the works of that virtue. For example, devotion is a ladder; its rungs are to pray, to contemplate, to hear masses, sermons, and to receive communion, etc. Mercy is another ladder; its rungs are the seven corporal works, and the seven spiritual works of mercy. Chastity is another ladder; its rungs are the custody of the five senses, custody of the eyes, of the ears and hearing, of those matters of the flesh etc., avoiding bad company, and occasions of sin. Those therefore who secretly do these works of virtue, secretly climb, and in silence enter the fortress of the King of heaven, and so he says, "Arise." About this David said: "Blessed is the man whose help is from you: in his heart he has disposed to ascend by steps, in the vale of tears in the place which he has set," (Ps 83:6-7).

Note the example in the Lives of the Fathers [of the Desert], about Eucharisto and his wife, who with the four ladders of virginity, penance, devotion, and mercy, climbed to Paradise. This way is good for persons in the world, who perform their devotions and penances secretly, like widows at home. To such

Christ says, "Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your father to give you the kingdom," of heaven, (Lk 12:32).

Please note, I want to say something here about that which says, "We with our learning wallow in hell." Three conditions are there of learning, namely, Sorcery [*nigromantia*], Law, and, Theology. The first is evil of itself, and all those who study and practice it are excommunicated. The second is of law, namely canon and civil law, which are of themselves good, but can be evil when they are studied and practiced with an evil purpose. Then they sin mortally, and are wholly in sin. But they should correct their intention so that it is done for the common good and maintaining justice. The same for canon law. If they study it so that they might gain a benefice, it is a sin, because the purpose is evil. The same if they skip reciting the divine office for the sake of study. Theology of itself is the best, but if it is sought from an evil intention, so that one might rise above others[ in the church]through this study, it counts for nothing. From such knowledge one obtains internal death, when he says, "I shall be a Master, untouchable!" But when he studies in order to know his creator, such study leads that person to glory. And so the Apostle, Paul, says: "Be not led away with various and strange doctrines. For it is best that the heart be established with grace," (Heb 13:9).

### III SOME FIND THE KINGDOM BY CHANCE

The third way is gaining heaven by chance. It is just like you finding a wallet with money by chance on the road – you didn't think about it, nor ask for it, nor perhaps did you believe it could happen. This way is like those people who live in sin and vice for their whole youth, and then, in their old age, at the gate of death, God gives them such contrition and sorrow for sins, that they find Paradise. In this way the thief, who always led a wicked life, reached Paradise. About him Pope Leo said, that he had never done anything good, but when he was at the gate of death, already crucified, and should have died, he had such contrition that he could hardly form words, "Lord, remember me..." To him Christ replied, "Amen I say to you, this day you shall be with me in Paradise," (Lk 23:42-43). See how by chance he discovered Paradise, about which he never cared nor believed.

Note here the humility of the thief in asking, and the generosity of Christ in giving. The thief did not ask for the kingdom of heaven, because he judged himself because of his sins, unworthy, but rather he asked, "Lord, remember me when you shall come into your kingdom. Just as I am your companion here on the cross [*in patibulo*], so may I be a companion of those who shall be on your right in the judgment." Note, "when you come into your kingdom;" He does not assign a definite time when, that is to say, in the judgment, "you receive me in your kingdom." But behold the generosity of Christ, "Amen I say... etc." and he forgave him all sins, both with respect to guilt, and with respect to punishment. Nevertheless he did not enter immediately into the heavenly Paradise, nor the terrestrial; rather he descended into limbo where he saw the divine essence, and had Paradise essentially, which is to see God.

Morally. I believe that whoever of you might wish to gain Paradise in this way, not caring about the good life, nor of penance, but to live carelessly [*vivere ad libitum*], saying, "Just as God spared the thief, so be it [for me]." Note how in all of Scripture one does not read of anyone else who lived wickedly and yet had a good end, only the thief. The reason which some devout teachers alleged why the thief who was suspended at Christ right was converted, and not that one who was on his left, was because the shadow of the arm of Christ fell upon him. The cross of Christ was higher as if Christ had been the captain of the thieves, the shadow of whom was of such great power, that it enlightened him. No wonder then that the shadow of Peter was of such power that it healed the sick man, as we read in Acts 5:15. Therefore arguing from the lesser, etc. However there is a prophecy about this, "They shall

be converted, who sit under his shadow," (Hos 14:8). We are indeed foolish, if because of this lone miracle, which happened only once, we should think that it can happen to us. Many other miracles are told about Christ, but only this one speaks of such [a conversion].

So beware lest it happen to you as it happened to the foolish knight. The story is about the king who built a noble city, which he wished to populate only with generous people, and so he put out the word, that he wished to give a beautiful house and a good pension to each generous person coming to the city to live. Two knights, friends, heard the announcement and wanted to go there. One prepared himself well, and dressed himself up, and packed for himself the necessities for the journey. The other chose not to take anything for his expenses, hoping and trusting, that on the way he would find a wallet full of money. The other one said to him, "Don't count on this, because to find a wallet with money on the road happens very rarely." But he did not heed these words. So later, on the way, he had to sell his horse and clothes. Wouldn't you judge this one to have been foolish? Truly, he was foolish.

This most powerful king is our Lord Jesus Christ, who is, "the King of kings, and Lord of lords," (Rev19:16) who built the noble city of Paradise, about which David said, "Glorious things are said of you, O city of God," (Ps 86:3), which he wished to populate only with noble people, namely with the saints, the just and the good. He made a law, an announcement about this. The "announcers," were the apostles and preachers. The two knights were the two classes of people, clergy and laity, who go to Paradise. One of whom takes with himself money for the journey, 10 florins, that is they keep the Ten Commandments, or 12 florins, that is the 12 penitential works which are sufficient lead to life:

1. The first is recognition of sin.
2. The second contrition of heart.
3. Third, the purpose of amendment.
4. Fourth, avoidance of bad companions.
5. Fifth, oral confession.
6. Six, physical penance.
7. Seventh, humble prayer.
8. Eighth, giving alms.
9. Ninth, restitution of debts.
10. Tenth, forgiveness of injuries.
11. Eleventh, the reparation of a person's good name.
12. Twelfth, receiving Communion.

Whoever has these coins in the purse of his conscience, to such the King says at the gate of his city, "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your Lord," (Mt 25:23). It happens otherwise with him who does not wish to do penance saying, "Just as God spared the thief, so me, because God is as merciful now as he was then." That is to say, "I do not care about the money, and I shall find a wallet, etc. namely the mercy of God." But he does not always find it. It is to him Christ at the gate of the city says, "The unprofitable servant, cast out into the exterior darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth," (Mt 25:30). If you find a religious and ask, "Where are you going?" He replies, "Paradise." And when you ask, "Are you bringing any money?" Immediately he replies, "When I get old I will find a full purse." The same for priests and laymen. Christians, let us therefore do good works, otherwise we shall not enter: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven," (Mt 7:21). Therefore, "While we have time, let us work good," (Gal 6:10).