

Solemnity of Christ the King

Year C, 2025

2 Sam 5:1-3

Col 1:12-20

Ps 122

Lk 23:35-43

Paradise

Today is the last Sunday in Ordinary Time, a special Sunday dedicated to Christ as king, to his kingship, and to his kingdom. Of all that has been and could be said about this feast day, I want to prayerfully focus our attention on the last word in today's gospel: *paradise*. Perhaps surprisingly, *paradise* is a rare word in the New Testament. It occurs only three times and only once in all the gospels: here in the gospel of Luke.

It is interesting that when the repentant criminal asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his *kingdom*, Jesus replies to him, not in terms of the kingdom or of heaven, but of *paradise*. "Today," Jesus promises the repenting man, "you will be with me in *paradise*."

We would do well to imagine for a while what we understand by *paradise*. What images come to mind? How do we envision *paradise*? What does *paradise* mean to us? Surely it must be a place of peace, light, holiness, beauty, and love; a land of tranquility and order, surrender and joy; a realm free of worry and sorrow, bereft of every grief and sadness; a place of joy and happiness, where every holy desire is fulfilled, where lack is unknown and want impossible. Whatever we can think of or think up, however full of wonder and delight, *paradise* itself will far surpass our ability to

even imagine it, according to the scriptures “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:8; Is 64:3).

Imagining heaven, paradise, is the whole topic of the hit song “I can only imagine” by the Christian band MercyMe. The song became super popular in the early 2000s. In it, the singer imagines what it would be like to be surrounded by God’s glory in heaven, to be with Jesus in paradise. He asks:

*What will my heart feel?
Will I dance for You Jesus
or in awe of You be still?
Will I stand in Your presence
or to my knees, will I fall?
Will I sing hallelujah?
Will I be able to speak at all?*

And he answers: *I can only imagine // I can only imagine*

All that the singer is sure of is that with Jesus in paradise, whatever he does, all that he does, will be an act of worship. All that he does, and whatever he does, will bring him supreme happiness, a happiness that no sorrow can touch, a happiness that never fades or decreases, a supreme joy that is endless, of which he will never grow weary, which will seem ever new (cf Is 40:31; Rev 21:5).

Now, I want us to dig into the meaning of the word paradise a little more. When we think of paradise, we think of heaven. In many

languages – English of course being a little different – the word for sky and heaven are the same word. In French, *le ciel*. In Spanish, *el cielo*. Our word “the heavens” can also mean the sky, up there, and by extension, the place where God dwells, a place inaccessible to us, who live down here. Heaven is “up there.”

All this is curiously wonderful or wonderfully curious, because the word paradise works just in the opposite way. Paradise comes to us from a French word, drawn from a Latin word, taken from a Greek word, borrowed from a word, *pairidaeza*, from an ancient Near Eastern language called Avestan that means something like “an enclosed garden” or “a walled or protected park.” So quite literally, paradise as a concept, is not up there, but it is *down here*, on earth, a thing of this earth.

Imagine, since we’re imagining, how precious such a secret garden would be in the arid ancient Near East: rich in water, lush with plant life, safe, secure, peaceful, beautiful, a refuge from the blasting heat and chafing sand of the surrounding desert, a place of life and rest, a garden of delights. Paradise.

When Jesus, then, promises paradise to the repentant criminal, he hints at Genesis and the creation story, how in the beginning “the Lord God had planted a garden in Eden, in the east,” through which a river rose to water the garden so that “every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food” could grow (Gen 2:8-10). This was paradise, the Edenic garden, where all was good.

How wonderful then, when trying to imagine the afterlife, eternal life, life everlasting, the *scriptures themselves* can only grasp at what it must be like to be in the presence of God, and they even use terms that are seemingly contradictory: heaven as the skies above where God dwells and paradise below as an earthly garden, where humanity makes its home.

You see, we can only imagine. But the truth is we cannot even imagine. Our imagining is not enough, but it's all we have and all we can do. And so until what shall be is revealed (cf 1 Jn 3:2), we can imagine heaven up there or paradise down here. Until then, we must think about "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise," as St Paul exhorted (Phil 4:8). And with our sights set on heaven (or on paradise), the "peace of God that surpasses all understanding will keep [our] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" until that day, when, may it please God, we, too, like the repentant thief, will be summoned to be with Jesus forever in his kingdom, which is "an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace." The kingdom and heaven and paradise, or all three, together, at the same time, in ways we cannot even imagine.

The more we think about heaven, the more we contemplate paradise, the more we will engage our hearts to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, the more we will be ready

for the day when the Lord's kingdom will come for each of us. By pondering nothing earthly-minded, but setting our sights and hopes on heaven, we will develop within a deep sense of heaven, and come to desire heaven all the more, and finally, let us hope, have the instinctive presence of mind demonstrated by the good thief to ask the Lord Jesus always, but especially at the hour of our death, to remember us when he and his kingdom come. And asking this with faith and with hope, with true and sincere repentance in our hearts, we can hope to hear those blessed words spoken by him who is king of kings and lord of lords, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Long live Christ the King! May his reign be eternal! May his heavenly kingdom come! May we be with him forever in paradise! Amen.