

In Luke's gospel, only 5 people call Jesus by his first name. Four of them follow it up with another title: Two people possessed by demons call him "Jesus, Holy one of God" and "Jesus, Son of the Most High God." A leper calls him "Jesus, master," and a blind man calls him, "Jesus, son of David." His disciples never called him by his first name. Even as a young boy lost in the Temple, his parents called him "Son." As Jesus goes through his passion, the rulers and soldiers try to strip away his titles, making fun of him as "the chosen one," "the Christ of God," or "the King of the Jews." But only one person in the whole gospel calls him Jesus without any other title, just Jesus, as if they were the best of friends. It's a man who seems to be meeting him for the first time, one of the two criminals crucified with him.

We do not know the crimes of these two men. Two other gospels call them bandits or revolutionaries. Tradition has called them the good thief and the bad thief, and has even given them the names Dismas and Gestas. Dismas is listed among the saints of our church.

After all, he makes a remarkable statement of faith. He believes that Jesus has a kingdom. He believes that Jesus will come into it, and he believes that he can have a part in the kingdom, even though he is a criminal, and even though he is dying. He has nothing to lose. He hangs on a cross next to Jesus, equals in disreputation, punishment and suffering, so he drops the fancy stuff. He doesn't use any titles, he turns to the guy next to him, and he calls him by his first name, Jesus.

Then he makes this request: "Remember me. Don't forget me. As my body leaves this earth, don't let me go with it. Keep me in mind." At the Last Supper, Jesus made a similar request to his disciples. Taking bread and wine from the table and sharing it with them, he said, "Do this in memory of me. Keep me in mind. Make me present in your mind and heart, even when I am physically gone. Remember me."

At the very end of his life, hanging on the cross, Jesus does what he came to do. He asks his father to forgive those who crucified him, even though they did not ask for forgiveness, on the grounds that they know not what they do. And he tells the criminal who wants to be remembered, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." He did what he came to do: the name Jesus, the name the angel gave him at the annunciation and his parents gave him at his circumcision, the name that so few people pronounced, the name means, "Savior." The only ones who call him that throughout Luke's gospel are those desperate to be saved from possession, illness and death.

On Palm Sunday, we behold the great sacrifice of Jesus, and in desperation, with nothing to lose and everything to gain, we call out to be saved from our sins. We speak to him like he's our best friend: "Jesus," we say, "Jesus, remember me," and he says, "Today you will be with me." That is what Jesus came to do.