



# God between the criminals

## Good Friday Message, by Pröpstin Astrid Kleist

*“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (Lk 23:33).”*

In these few sober words, Luke the Evangelist describes one of the cruelest forms of execution in the Roman Empire, which was used to deter criminals and rebels. Dying in public, tormented for all to see – the symbol of power in a strife-ridden world.

For those laid on the cross there was no turning back. They were nailed there to the bitter end – fixated on what they had said and done. And Jesus? It was a crime to execute him without guilt. He had lived with deep trust and faith in God.

Jesus on the cross without guilt, with two criminals on either side. One full of mockery: “Save yourself and us.” The other full of amazement: “This man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:41-42).

The logic of settling up, of tit for tat, a picture of God drawn from human justice based on deeds, does not make sense when the just man suffers punishment alongside the criminals.

It dawns on the one next to Jesus, “We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” The illusion that human justice rewards the good and punishes the wicked is obsolete. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus



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says to the criminal next to him, “today you will be with me in Paradise.” Sinners and righteous alike suffer the cross. Yet Jesus’ death between the two criminals reveals God’s grace. A God becomes visible who is greater than our human heart.

I read in the news:

Sobbing, Sergei kisses the bloody face of his dead brother. A Russian missile struck Igor’s barracks near Mikolaiv. He and dozens of his comrades were killed. Igor volunteered, in order to protect his country. That was not even a month ago. Galina, his fiancé, is with her Russian parents in Moldova. Only Sergei is there to bury his brother. With a shovel, in the barracks, on the edge of the sports ground. He can hear the thunder of gunfire. Is it their side or the enemy? The shots bring the same destruction, they bring death. The nearby district of Kulbakino, where Sergei lives, is almost deserted. Where people lived together only a month ago, talking Russian and Ukrainian with one another, there is no more water in the pipes, no heating. Everyone who could has escaped to safety.

Good Friday brings the wrongdoing before God, the unjust killing and the unjust dying. The suffering of Jesus and the suffering of humans become one. Passion stories everywhere – and in their midst the God of mercy.

Jesus does not cry, “Give me justice!” Instead, he says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

These words open the eyes of one of the criminals being crucified with him. In the mirror of forgiveness he dares to look into his own abyss and recognizes his own guilt.

The people not close to Jesus also came nearer in his suffering and “stood by, watching.” Perhaps they got to know him differently from those who knew him better. According to Luke, “all his acquaintances ... stood at a distance.”

On Easter morning we, too, will stand there and look into our own abysses and the chasms of our age. Again, differently, we will be startled at how God calls to new life from the darkness of the shadow of death.

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