

*33When 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. 34Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." 39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

At the Abbey where I spent some of my sabbatical stands an altar. Decorated with gold leaf, sheltered by a canopy supported by four great pillars also covered with gold leaf, it stands a monument to Christ.

I remember the first time I worshipped beside that altar, many years ago. I sat gazing, waiting for Christ to appear. Surely in the midst of this glory Christ would descend. But the service ended and Christ had not come again.

Daily worshipping at the side of that altar is a frail man, his voice barely a whisper. Brother Juan Diego is dying of leukemia. He did not capture my attention as did the altar towering over him. But one noon waiting for lunch we talked.

He told me of his passion - teaching Native American children the catechism of the church. Once a week another monk drives this dying man to the reservation fifty miles to the north where he tells young people of Christ. The trip is almost more than he can endure his health is so poor. But he begs the abbot to let him go and teach of Christ.

Maybe he teaches in the words of Colossians: "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross."

These words are like a great gold altar, pointing to Christ. "All things created through him and for him." It is not only these words that are an altar, but this whole creation an altar honoring Christ - every tree and eagle and mountain and sunset existing through him and for him. And you and I created and living and serving for his glory. Every family brought into existence for his glory, for him - all laughter and joy given for him - your whole life a monument for Christ. All things have been created through him and for him.

Yet when he came to this temple created by him and for him, he entered by the back door. His presence within his mother's womb brought whispers of scandal. There was no great noting nor honoring of his birth. A few nameless ones were invited. As long as he gave the crowds what others could not many followed. But when free food and miracle were ended, so was their loyalty.

Think of the gold altar he might have constructed, the jewels and treasures he could have assembled to show his majesty. But the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell came not to dazzle us but give himself for us.

They stripped him. They scoffed and mocked and ridiculed - he asked for their forgiveness.

But one could see his glory that day, a criminal crucified beside him. In frail weakness he whispered: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And Jesus replied, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

And now another dying one believes that he serves this Lord by going to a forgotten place to preach to forgotten people. He believes paradise will be given to them. And that Jesus will be honored.

It is like what Jesus was doing that day, enduring it all so he could whisper to one dying man, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

We are, every one of us, the dying one. Sin and evil and darkness will hang us, one after another, there beside the one who created all things and for whom all things exist. But already, this day, Christ speaks the promise to you. "You will be with me in paradise."

Until that day our lives are for Jesus Christ. My life and your life were created through him and for him. Not for me, not for you, but for him. Amen.