

Word of Forgiveness

“Never a man spoke like this man.” That was the verdict (and the excuse) of the officer in charge of a group of soldiers who had been sent to arrest Jesus, and who then returned empty-handed to the religious leaders who had sent them. Armed and determined to accomplish their mission, while pushing their way through the crowd that had gathered around to hear Jesus teach, they made the “mistake” of listening to what he was saying. That stopped them dead in their tracks. Caught up in the sublime thoughts of his message, they soon forgot about what they’d come for, and found themselves like the rest of the crowd, hanging on his every word and hungering for more.

It seems that just about everyone who actually heard Jesus speak had a similar experience. Only those who intentionally tuned him out and hardened their hearts against him did not. Most felt something like the two Emmaus disciples, who recalling the lesson he had shared with them on the road said, *“Remember how our hearts burned within us while he talked and opened the Scriptures to us?”* There’s no question about it: Jesus knew how to speak directly to the human soul. And today, even those who hate him have to admit that his words and his teachings have done more to influence the world than any other person who has ever lived. And to those of us love him his words are truth and life.

And we also know that there is something especially weighty in a person’s last words. The things said on a deathbed or written in a last will and testament are understood by all to be carefully considered and full of meaning. We should expect that Jesus’ last words are no exception, especially when we consider just how important his death was to God’s eternal plan to save the world. If his words in life captured people’s attention and inspired their hearts and spirits, we will do well to give careful deliberation to his words in death. We will be rewarded when we do, for in the seven short utterances he spoke from the cross we are given magnificent vistas into the very heart and mind of God. In the next several weeks as we journey through the season of Lent together, we will be reflecting upon these “Seven Words from the Cross.” And tonight, we begin with the first.

So, go with me now, if you will, to the ancient city of Jerusalem where, outside its western wall is an abandoned rock quarry that now serves as the city dump. Here the refuse of the city is discarded and burned; and here amidst the stench of decay and the perpetual smoke of the smoldering piles of garbage is the site of public executions. The scene is nothing like the picturesque three crosses on a hill that you see in paintings and the movies, where the crucified victims hang rather patiently and calmly waiting for death to come. No, this is as ugly and dirty as it gets. But there *are* three crosses. And held to them by nails driven through their wrists and feet are three men who are twisting and turning in anguish as they struggle to pull themselves up high enough to suck in their next breath.

We focus on the man nailed to the center cross. He has been beaten savagely, far worse than his two fellows. He seems to have been the target of almost limitless cruelty—people must have stood in line to vent their brutal malice upon him. Even now, they seem frustrated that they can no longer reach him with their fists, so instead they hurl hateful insults, hoping to heap on him just a bit more damage and pain. You would think that he were the most vile criminal who ever lived that the crowd should delight in seeing him suffer so—a serial child rapist, murderer, and cannibal or something even worse ...

but no, the court ultimately was not able to even name a single charge against him, much less convict him of it. The decree of condemnation posted above his battered and bloody head, so that all may read and take warning not to do the same, lists no crimes at all – it only reads: “King of the Jews”.

And now, moving down from that placard (which itself is intended as a spiteful joke) we look into his face—a face barely recognizable as human. Eyes swollen nearly shut, nose smashed flat, crusted blood marking the place where his beard has been torn out, most of his teeth missing ... lips split and bleeding; and from those lips now, with surprising strength and clarity, these words of startling grace: “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*”

They are words that do not match the picture. They seem terribly out of place. If they had been the caption of such a photograph in the newspaper, you would be certain that it was a typesetter’s mistake. And yet ... this really is what the picture before us is all about. It was for this that he came to earth and became the baby in Mary’s arms. It was for this that he was baptized by John in the Jordan and began a ministry of teaching and healing. And it was for this that he came in triumph to Jerusalem just six days before: to suffer and die to secure for us—all of us—the forgiveness of sins. And here in this short phrase of unbelievable charity, we can begin to see what divine forgiveness is all about.

He says, “*Father.*” First, we see that forgiveness must begin with God. It is to his heavenly Father that Jesus directs his prayer. Every sin ever committed is first and foremost against him, as we read earlier in the Psalm, “*against you, you only have I sinned*”. For forgiveness to occur, it is God’s wrath that must be held back and his justice that must be satisfied. And you can imagine how any human father would react to seeing his child so abused, what white hot fury would fall upon the tormentors—and here Jesus asks not only that the Father not punish those who are hurting him so, but that he actually redirects his righteous anger against them upon himself, their victim. It’s incredible ... and yet, in his prayer is a quiet confidence. The Son knows his Father. He knows his boundless capacity for mercy – and he is certain that his prayer, as enormous a request as it is, will be favorably answered.

“*Forgive them.*” Here we see that forgiveness requires an intercessor. We cannot plead for ourselves in the court of divine justice, nor would we if given the opportunity. The sinful mind is hostile to God. We run from him, curse him when we think we’re safe, and tremble in fear we’re when caught; but we can offer no defense at all. Only he who was both the eternal Son of God and a sinless human being could bridge the vast gulf between his Father and his sinful brothers and sisters in flesh. And as the only possible mediator between these infinitely distant extremes, he interposed himself and carried the consequences of all our sin. You see, for God to be just and holy—as he cannot help but be—there had to be punishment for sin. There had to be a punishment as great as the accumulated sentences of every sinner who ever lived—and that is what the Son of God suffered upon the cross so that he could intercede for us and say to his Father: “*Forgive them, their sentence has been carried out on me.*”

“*For they know not what they do.*” Finally, we see that forgiveness recognizes all need. Christ’s knowledge and awareness of all sins enables him to reach out to all without exception. God in Christ has no limits or boundaries. All guilt is provided for and all need covered. You see, when we sin fail to recognize how serious a thing it is. We have no concept at all about how much each “little” sin offends God. We pretend that he can just look the other way, or laugh it off, or that maybe he won’t notice. Right. Imagine

not noticing your teeth being kicked in or the skin on your back being flailed off. Nor do we have any concept concerning how sinful we really are. We sin constantly in our thoughts, in what we do, and in what we say; and yet if I asked you to list your sins over the past day or so, I expect that list would be relatively short. It's true that as we grow in the knowledge of God, we gain a greater understanding of our guilt, but still, we only see the tip of iceberg.

And ignorance is not innocence. It does not excuse or cancel sin. Nor is information salvation. Just recognizing our guilt won't save us from hell. But Jesus knows that we are spiritually blind and helpless. He reaches out to us because we cannot reach to him. He melts our hard hearts and turns us to repentance. And by his Holy Spirit, he gives us faith to cling to the salvation he earned for us. This is divine love providing for all our needs—the vast majority of which we don't even know we have.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a Japanese war criminal awaiting execution for his murderous and brutal treatment of civilians and prisoners of war, was given a copy of the New Testament in his own language by the chaplain who was assigned to minister to the spiritual needs of those in the military prison. At first, he ignored it completely. He was a wicked and hard man. He was certainly no Christian, though he had a vague idea of what Christians believed—and had no use for it. He was a soldier whose view of honor included never showing weakness or admitting to having done anything wrong. At one point, boredom drove him to open the book at random, and he began to read St. Luke's account of the crucifixion. He came to these words: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

About the experience he wrote: "I stopped. I was stabbed to the heart, as if pierced with a five-inch nail. What did that verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it his compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart, I believed. Through this simple sentence, I was led to the whole of Christianity."

The first word from the Cross is the keynote of our Lord's mission and saving work. It brings the peace of God that passes all understanding to the soul suffering with guilt. And as we listen to these words our hearts burn within us and we are made certain of God's forgiveness for all our offenses. When that happens, the prayer of Jesus is answered, and his work is made complete in us.

May we always receive his grace in this way, and with gratitude and the power of his Spirit, learn to pray with Jesus for those who sin against us, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!