

Jesus' Last Words: The Word of Forgiveness

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First Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 53:12, Luke 23:33-34

A person's last words on earth are important. They usually reveal what is uppermost in a person's mind and heart. They generally seek to convey an urgent and helpful message. It's interesting to note the last words of famous people . . .

There are no more famous last words than the utterances of Jesus as he hung upon a cross. Jesus spoke seven times in his agony, and each sentence or word is full of meaning. So let us listen. May God give us ears to hear as Jesus speaks to us. During this season of Lent, let us ponder anew the meaning of his words for our lives.

Lk 23:33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

Lk 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

It doesn't come as any great surprise that Jesus' first word from the cross was a prayer. Prayer was a habit with him. It was more than a habit actually; it was his life. It is only natural that at such a moment of dire need he would pray to his Father.

But what does surprise is what he prayed for. He actually prayed for the forgiveness of those who had just put down their bloody hammers after impaling him upon a cross. Can you imagine? He was beaten, scorned and mocked. He was nailed and spat upon and left to die a slow, agonizing death. He was treated with such incredible indignity and all the while he knew he was completely innocent. And here he is with an expression of love and forgiveness upon his lips for his executioners. You would think that curses, not prayers for forgiveness, would come from his lips.

But you see, at the heart of the cross, at the heart of the gospel, is a word of forgiveness. "*Father forgive them.*" To curse is human. But to forgive is divine.

"Father forgive them."

Them? For whom does Jesus pray?

The soldiers who had done the mocking and the nailing? The soldiers who were so callous and hardhearted they played dice games under his cross? Can you imagine playing games while the very Son of God was dying above you? Was he praying for these soldiers who had treated this crucifixion like a hundred others and were completely indifferent to his suffering?

Was he praying for the religious authorities -- the chief priests and scribes who in their envy and pride and selfishness would stop at nothing to eradicate this heretic and menace to their own position in church and society? Was he praying for these "respected" churchmen who paid a measly thirty pieces for his head?

Was he praying for Pilate, whose cowardice led directly to his crucifixion? Good ol' Pilate who didn't have the guts to make a decision for truth and stand up for justice; who, washing his hands of the whole bloody affair, pronounced himself innocent.

Was Jesus praying for the crowd? Jesus always had compassion for the crowds. He fed them one day in miraculous fashion beside the sea. He taught them and healed the sick. But now the fickle crowd turned against him and they all shouted out "Crucify him, crucify him!" Did Jesus have them in mind when he prayed?

Or how about the disciples? They were his friends. But real friends are loyal. They stick with you when the going gets tough. But "they all forsook him and fled" says the scripture. They betrayed him to a man, and in so doing they were more his enemies than his friends at the moment he needed them most.

So for whom did he pray when he said "Father forgive them?" All of these and more. He was also praying for you and me.

It's easy to blame the people in the drama. We blame the soldiers--how could they be so callous? We blame the Pharisees -- how could they be so blind? We blame Pilate -- how could he be such a coward? We blame the crowd -- how could they be so fickle? We blame the disciples -- how could they be so disloyal?

But "they is us." Those same hateful attitudes, those same tendencies to do wrong are in us, too. We don't like to admit it. We like to keep the dark side of our personalities hidden. But it is there. We, too, had a hand in the crucifixion; our pride, our jealousy, our bitterness, our rage nailed Jesus to the cross. In the words of the old hymn:

*Who was the guilty?
Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee;
Twas I Lord, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.*

The cross forces us to come to terms with our complicity. The sight of the innocent Son of God hanging on a cross forces us to realize our own personal, daily, repeated sins and injustices. Every time we display hatred and anger toward another, every time we utter a careless word that hurts, every time we harden our hearts against a person in need,

every time we ignore what God is requiring of us, we are driving another nail in the cross. Jesus is crucified anew in the suffering we cause others. Every time we hurt another we hurt him.

So Jesus was praying for you and me. He was asking forgiveness for us: we who ignore the call to sacrifice for others, we who prefer our self-concern, we who hate to change and who destroy the earth and each other in small pieces. It is to us he spoke: *"Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do."*

We know not what we do when we sin. We don't realize how serious it is. We have no idea what damage one angry word or one wrong deed can do - how it impacts and destroys the people we live with and work with. We just don't know what pain our sin causes God - the enormity of it all.

The cross reminds us of that. The cross brings judgment down upon the evil we do.

But as we look at the ugly cross of pain and abuse and brokenness, we hear the Savior whispering something: *"Father, forgive."* What beautiful words! What startling words, for they are contrary to all expectation! *"Father, forgive."*

We are sinners. We own our complicity. But the incredible good news is that we are not forsaken or abandoned by God. Someone has said: *"Forgiveness is a God who will not leave us after all we've done."* We are capable of great sin, and we have done wrong, but we are forgivable and we are loved and we are not abandoned. Amazing! God does not hold it against us. When God forgives, God takes us back into his friendship and walks with us as if we had never sinned. God forgets all our ugly past. We have God's own promise: *"I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

There is a true story of a Catholic priest living in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who once carried a secret burden of long-past sin buried deep in his heart. He had committed that sin once, many years before, during his time in seminary. No one else knew of this sin. He had repented of it and he had suffered years of remorse for it, but he still had no peace, no inner joy, no sense of God's forgiveness.

There was a woman in this priest's parish who deeply loved God, and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ, and He with her. The priest, however, was skeptical of her claims, so to test her visions he said to her, *"You say you actually speak directly with Christ in your visions. Let me ask you a favor. The next time you have one of these visions, I want you to ask Him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary."*

The woman agreed and went home. When she returned to the church, a few days later, the priest said, *"Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?"*

She replied, "Yes, He did."

"And did you ask Him what sin I committed in seminary?"

"Yes, I asked Him."

"Well, what did He say?"

"He said, 'I don't remember.'"

This is what God want us to know about the forgiveness He freely offers you and me. When our sins are forgiven, they are forgotten. The past - with its sins, hurts, brokenness, and self-recrimination - is gone, dead, crucified, remembered no more. What God forgives, God forgets. : *"I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

There is great power in such forgiveness. Forgiveness brings peace of mind and frees the spirit. It opens the gates of new life. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel – take it to heart. No matter what you have done or failed to do, you can begin again with God. That is the amazing promise of God.

Can you hear the man hanging on the cross? *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

The Father forgives . . .