

“Father Forgive Them”

Luke 23:32-34

During this Lenten Season, we are going to focus our attention on Jesus’ seven words from the cross. This evening, we hear Christ’s first words, **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”**

Jesus’ first words, which are really a prayer, is a prayer not for Himself, but for others. The character of Christ is seen so clearly. To the end, His focus was always on the needs of others first. And in this case, He focuses on their greatest need – the forgiveness of sin.

But for whom is this prayer said? Who was present at the crucifixion? Who was in need of this forgiveness? We know about the two criminals who were crucified on either side of Him, and the soldiers who cast lots for His clothing. At first, it may appear that the two criminals and the Roman soldiers had very little in common, but the truth is that they were more alike than they realized.

The chief priests and scribes gathered at the cross to mock and jeer at Jesus. Most likely Simon of Cyrene, who was made to carry His cross, was still there. The faithful women were there.

Mary, his mother, and John the Apostle were there. This prayer is not only for all of them, but for Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas and the Apostles who were not there but were in hiding. This prayer was for Peter who was devastated that he had denied even knowing Jesus. And this prayer is for you and me and for all people of all time.

In these words, we see the true character of God, the mercy of God, and the desire of God for all people to be saved. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Of the criminals hanging on the cross, we know this prayer was answered for one of them. Did the chief priests repent that day? Not that we know of. But in the book of Acts, we are told that many priests did come to be believers in Christ (Acts 6).

Did the Roman soldiers repent? Were those men who drove the nails through His hands and feet led to repentance and forgiveness? One of them did make a profound observation that truly He was the Son of God. Later, in Paul’s ministry, a sizable number of the Praetorian Guard did become Christians. Did Pontius Pilate repent that day and receive forgiveness? There are stories from the early Christian era that tell of Pilate being a Christian, but it would be sheer speculation.

But given all the anecdotal evidence (the stories of faith and forgiveness) on top of the biblical account that fundamental

changes happened in a number of people who were hostile to Christ at the time, it seems that this prayer was more than just an example of Jesus being pure and righteous in all His thoughts, words, and deeds – even to the end. This prayer to God the Father was answered. Forgiveness, even for actions that seem unforgivable like hammering nails into the Son of God; forgiveness from God is real.

But those who were outwardly hostile to Him were not the only ones for whom Jesus was praying. John the apostle faithfully stood at the foot of the cross. Did he or Mary the mother of our Lord or any of His faithful followers recognize Jesus as their Substitute Sacrifice or as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Those who came to the tomb on Easter morning did not come expecting the grave to be empty. “They know not what they do.”

The point is that Jesus desired forgiveness for people who had, to this point, demonstrated neither sorrow for their sin nor faith in what Jesus was doing. That is grace. That is undeserved love. Contrition, sorrow for your sin, and repentance, turning away from your sin, are not works we perform in order to earn God’s forgiveness. The concept of “earning grace” is a contradiction in itself – it is an oxymoron. You cannot earn that which is given freely.

In our Baptism, we receive God's free gift of grace. The young child brought to the font does not know what he is doing. That infant does not know that he is sinning. God pours out His grace upon him.

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask our Father in heaven to hear Christ's prayer from the cross on our behalf – "forgive us our trespasses". And because of our faith which the Holy Spirit has created in us at our Baptism, our lives are a perpetual example that our Father in heaven does answer prayer. By faith, we live under the grace of our Baptism. We are forgiven even when we do not know what we are doing. Amen.