

Jesus prays for each of us from His cross, begging His Father, “Father, forgive them”

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Within the four Gospels at the crucifixion of Jesus, there are what Tradition refers to as the “seven last words” of Jesus as he hangs on the cross. We find three of those words in John's Gospel. The three words are “Behold, your son...behold, your mother” (Jn 19:26-27), “I thirst” (Jn 19:28) and “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). In Mark and in Matthew we have only one word and it is the same word – the word of abandonment, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Mk 15:34 and Mt 27:46). And in Luke's Gospel, we have the other three words – “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34), “This day you will be with me in paradise” to the thief who asked Jesus to remember him (Lk 23:43), and then there is his commendation into the hands of the Father, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46). In those seven words we see revealed the depth of Jesus' love.

This year I want to focus with you on the word from Luke's Gospel, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). There are two parts to that word and both reveal the depth of the love and mercy of our God. First of all, the words, “Father, forgive them...” Those words should fill our hearts with wonder, when we look at what Jesus has experienced for us, what it meant for him to be crucified. Remember this is after he has been betrayed. This is after he has been spit upon and slapped. It is after he has been scourged and a crown of thorns placed on his head. For those of you who saw “The Passion of the Christ,” you saw a depiction of the bloody mess that his body was in and what he experienced.

Images of the crucifixion, as in this Church when we look upon the crucifix, even though it radiates a beauty and reveals the love of God, are incredibly clean compared to what Jesus went through and what he experienced. For those of you who have read about the Shroud of Turin, even if you are skeptical that it was the burial cloth of Christ, which I am not – having studied it, read about it, reflected upon it in faith, I can say it is most likely Jesus' shroud – but when one reads about what is revealed on that shroud – the lashes across his back and his legs, the fact that it was not just a simple wreath that was placed on his head but it was a true crown whose thorns literally pierced his skull, and we know how sensitive our heads can be when they are injured – it reveals that his nose was hit so hard that it was more than likely broken and one side of his face was hit so hard that his eye was swollen shut. The inhumanity of the crucifixion and suffering that is revealed on the cross makes us all pause.

Also, there is the fact that the Romans always crucified their victims naked. He hung on the cross totally naked, yet he speaks the words, "Father, forgive them..." My beloved brothers and sisters, we see revealed in the first part of that word the depth of Jesus' love for us. He goes before the Father asking the Father, begging the Father, "Forgive them from the smallest of their sins to the greatest". And Jesus prays for each one of you today. He prays for each one of us from his cross, begging his Father, "Father, forgive them."

In the second part of the word, he speaks the words, "...for they know not what they do." That reveals even more the depth of his mercy – mercy that goes beyond justice. With justice, a person will receive what is his due. Certainly those who crucified Jesus knew what they were doing. They wanted him crucified. They wanted him dead. They wanted him away from them – whether it was the Romans or whether it was the Jewish leaders.

And, yes, even his apostles who denied him, who fled from him, knew what they were doing. Certainly there was fear in some of their hearts. There was angst and confusion. But it is the mercy of Jesus who says, "...for they do not know what they do." And those words too are spoken for us today. That is the mercy of our God. That is the depth of love that he has for each one of you. Even though some of you may not even want to be here right now, but you are because your parents have said, "You're going to the Good Friday services," or some of you may think, "Why do I come every year?" or maybe this is one of the few times that you do come to church, understand in your hearts what Jesus has accomplished for you, because all of us are sinners.

Do we allow his words to speak to the very depth of our own hearts? Or have our hearts become so hardened, so calloused, so worldly, so formed by the culture that we are blind to Jesus' love? That blindness was where the heart of Pilate was, where the hearts of the Roman soldiers were, where the hearts of the Jewish authorities were. It is that blindness that Jesus looks at and says, "...they know not what they do."

We too are called to reflect upon the forgiveness of our God and we too are called to forgive as our God has forgiven us. It is consistent with Jesus' teaching in the Gospels that he would utter this word, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," for Jesus teaches forgiveness in the Gospels. He says to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven...Rise and walk," (Mt 9:5) and it causes all sorts of controversy. He says to the woman who is caught in adultery, "No one has condemned you nor do I. Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more" (Jn 8:11). He looks at Peter after he is risen and says, "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:17).

In teaching us to pray, he teaches us to pray that our sins may be forgiven as we forgive those who sin against us (Mt 6:9-15). Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian message. It is in the heart of Christ. His blood is poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. We too are called to forgive even our enemies. Jesus will tell us, "Turn the other cheek" (Mt 5:39). He will teach us, "Love your enemies" (Lk 6:27). I encourage each of

us to reflect upon the gift of forgiveness and to open our hearts to that forgiveness that our Lord offers to us on this Good Friday. Also, pray for the grace to forgive as Jesus forgives.

All of us know what happens to us when we do not forgive. We brood about the hurt or the wound, whatever it may be, every time it comes up. We become angry or we may even want to go so far as to kill the other person, maybe not physically, but with words – with words like, “I will never forgive that person,” with words like, “I hate that person,” with words like, “I will never speak to that person again,” and so many other words. That lack of forgiveness does not bind the other person, but it binds our hearts, it binds us, and that is why we must forgive. A person who may never enter into heaven is the one who absolutely refuses to ask for forgiveness or the one who refuses to offer forgiveness. Our God will not force us.

This Good Friday of 2008 let us reflect upon this word of Jesus, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Let those words burn within your hearts today. Ask Jesus to open your heart personally to receive that word and to hear him speak that word to you from the cross. As you come forward to venerate the cross, hear Jesus speak those words to you personally, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

My dearest sisters and brothers, if there is anyone who you refuse to forgive, anyone within your heart that, when you think about them, you kind of get a knot in your stomach, bring that person with you to the cross of Jesus and hear Jesus speak to them, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Ask Jesus in your own human weakness to help you make those words your words, so that you may forgive others as your heavenly Father has forgiven you.

May the word of Jesus, his first word from the cross, burn within each one of our hearts on this Good Friday: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”