

Father, Forgive them

Luke 23:33-34

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

As the hammers swung and nails pierced human flesh, as condemned men hung in agony, Roman soldiers would have heard all manner of things. Cries of pain, cries of blasphemy, cries of hate, cries of desperation, cries for mercy but I doubt if they ever heard prayers for forgiveness. This would have been something new, perhaps even shocking to these hardened and brutal men.

As we imagine the scene, as we consider what this prayer means, what it says about Jesus it is still astounding even shocking, words full of grace and love that still wring our emotions 2000 years later.

It is a prayer that takes us to the heart of the Father's great plan of salvation for the world and to the great example of love which we are to follow.

THE OFFER OF FORGIVENESS

That these words are on Jesus lips as he dies are a vivid and poignant reminder of the importance of the message of God's forgiveness to Jesus and to the whole Gospel of Luke

John the Baptist is to announce the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. (1:77) When Jesus meets a paralysed man rather than dealing with his physical need he deals firstly with his greater need, the forgiveness of his sins, and to put right with God (5:16-26).

Jesus continues to offer forgiveness to sinners, prostitutes, traitors, outcasts, welcoming them into the Kingdom of God, restored in relationship with their God. He tells perhaps his greatest parable about the amazing forgiving nature of God as a forgiving Father, but as Jesus' own story continues the price of this forgiveness becomes clear.

Jesus is to die as the one great sacrifice for sins. He is to drink the cup of God's wrath to secure salvation as sins are dealt with. His death is to be the centre piece of God's great plan of salvation and Jesus in loving submission to his Father's will, agrees to take the lonely and agonising path of the cross. There with arms spread wide, he with the Father offers forgiveness to a world which doesn't know what it is doing.

Here we clearly see the nature of our God. As we look around our world there are many ways that we can consider God, you could look to the stars and think of a god who is powerful yet distant, you could look to nature and see an uncaring god of the survival of the fittest, you could look to history and wonder if god even exists. But as Jesus prays we see that there is a God, a God who can be known as a Father who with his Son is in the business of forgiveness and is waiting for those who have wandered far away to come home, and together they are willing to bear the cost of that forgiveness.

In a sense the whole of Christianity is contained in this short prayer, and it is no surprise that after the resurrection the central part of the message of the church is taking the message of the forgiveness of sins in the name of the risen Jesus to the nations. This offer of forgiveness given by our dying saviour is a message for everyone in the world. (24:44-49)

What is humanity pictured doing in this poignant scene? They are playing games for his clothes. It is hard not to see great irony here. When the Bible wants an image of something that is transitory, something that will pass away it will often use clothes or

garments. As anyone with small children knows, or who have husbands who have favourite t shirts knows, clothes wear out, they pass away, they are of no lasting value. There is no market for worn out clothes, but "socks with holes in" on ebay and check it out, they become worthless. Yet as Jesus is offering the most important thing that all people need, forgiveness with God which comes with the promise of eternal life, humanity is rolling dice for Jesus garments.

What an amazing and profound picture of the twisted value system of our world. Humanity continues to not know what it is doing, chasing what will not last as Jesus still has his arms open wide freely offering eternal forgiveness. I wonder if his pain as he looks down on a world ignoring him is even greater than he felt on the cross.

"I did it for you, I died for you, O Father, forgive them."

What about you? Do receive this offer of forgiveness by God with joy, gratitude and love, or are you looking away, and playing games at the foot of the cross.

THE PRACTICING OF FORGIVENESS

If we are to stop playing games we also need to remember that Jesus is not here simply offering forgiveness he is modelling how we are to forgive. He did after all teach that his followers were to love their enemies, to continually forgive those asked for it, and to pray those truly scary words "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us." Forgiveness is not just to be experienced but given

There is perhaps no harder teaching of Jesus for when people hurt us we do not want offer forgiveness but to seek justice. There is perhaps no greater demonstration of God's power and grace in people's lives than when his people forgive. The first Christian martyr, Stephen, prayed for those who were stoning him and there have been other examples of Christian people reflecting this grace filled love of God.

In South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings under Archbishop Tutu a policeman named van de Broek confessed to shooting an 18yr old boy, and burning the body on a BBQ like a spit roast to destroy the evidence. 8 years later he returned to the same house, seized the boy's father, bound him, put him on a woodpile, poured petrol over him and, as his wife was forced to watch, set him on fire.

In the court was the now elderly widow and the court grew quiet as she was able to speak to the man who had taken her son and her husband. She asked that van de Broek go to the site of her husband's death and gather up dust so that she could give him a decent burial. The policeman silently nodded in agreement.

But she hadn't finished. She said "Mr van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like him to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real." Someone started singing "Amazing Grace" as the elderly widow made her way to the one who had caused her so much pain, but he did not hear a word, for he, overwhelmed, had fainted. (Yancey "Rumours" p223f)

Justice was not done that day, but something far greater happened; evil was not punished but rather overcome by grace. This is the model that Jesus has shown us, it is the way we are to live, but how often we fail.

Consider you own heart, a situation where you need to forgive, does such grace seem possible, or is your heart hard, the hurt to great, the cost to great

Look again to the cross to the one who in pain prayed for those who crucified him to be forgiven, and in his agony secured our forgiveness. Then pray

Father, Father forgive us, for we do know what we should do, but we don't do it. Help us to stop playing games at the foot of cross and follow the way of the crucified one. Help us to hear Jesus prayer of intercession for us and be so assured of our own forgiveness that we may learn to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven.