

## **Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing** **Sermon on Good Friday 2011**

Every year in Holy Week, every year on Good Friday the Christian Community around the world gathers to remember the hours of Jesus' crucifixion, from the noon of that excruciatingly painful day till darkness covered the earth, as the gospels tell us. Many of us remember Jesus' last 7 words on the cross, taken from the 4 gospels and put together as something like an inheritance for Jesus' friends. The words of a dying person are always significant but never more so than when that person is Jesus, the Son of God.

Today I would like to invite you to look with me at the first words which the biblical tradition lets Jesus speak from the cross:

***Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.***

***When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.***

***Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

***Luke 23:32-34***

...they don't know what they are doing.

"But we know. We know what they are doing!" writes Peter Storey, the former Bishop of the Johannesburg/Soweto area of the Methodist Church in South Africa in his book "Listening at Golgotha".

"They were busy with things only too familiar to our world: the greed that sells a friend for money; the fear that denies one's leader for survival; the cynicism that smears an innocent for political gain; the cruelty that tortures a prisoner for entertainment; the expediency that washes its hands of moral decision making; the mob spirit that exults in a victim's suffering; the stupidity that calls good evil and evil good.

That's what they were doing. If they didn't know it, we do. We know about this stuff."

And he continues: "Jesus was different. Jesus taught as he believed, lived as he taught, and died as he lived." And therefore we remember him.

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

The reality of violence is overwhelming in our world. We are aware of it through the news in the papers and on television, some have just escaped it, some have friends and family still in the middle of it all.

The experience of pain – our own and that of others - can be overwhelming.

Each of us carries the burden of our own personal wounds, losses and disappointments. There is worry, there is anger, there is grief... And they all can break one's heart. And they will, if we are left alone with the suffering...

So, what are we to do with our pain?

Where can we go?

We go to the cross.

The cross of Christ is the place where the suffering and the evil of the world are met by God's infinite compassion and mercy.

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

These words of Christ need to be spoken again and again...

We need those words – maybe more than ever... We need to bring our pain to Christ, to express it, to offer it, and to let it be met by God's love.

Luke's gospel is sometimes called "the gospel of the great pardons," and we all need that gospel pardon.

We need to take it into our hearts again and again, as often as we want to, as often as we need to. We need the loving-kindness and forgiveness of a God who loves us to the end.

In times of conflict and pain – such as the one in which Jesus lived – we experience the full impact of these words: ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

They shock us. They challenge us.

"Don't talk to me about forgiveness", something in us may want to shout. "If you hit me, I'll hit you back!" Do you know thoughts like that?

Why should we forgive someone who has inflicted an injury on us or someone we love? What does it mean to forgive?

We need urgently to explore what forgiveness really means. And it is a mistake to think that forgiveness is something of the past and has no future. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, again a voice from South Africa, says: "There is no future without forgiveness." And if we recall the history of his country we may well understand what he is talking about.

He teaches us that we cannot will our way to genuine forgiveness. We can only find it.

And to go and search for it is a risky journey.

What shall we do when our heart is filled with rage and anger? ...when we just cannot forgive, nor forget, nor...

"There is nothing inherently wrong with anger", Desmond Tutu says. "It is natural to be angry when we have been hurt. But when we hang on to anger, nursing it along, letting it become so familiar and necessary to our sense of self that we can't let it go, then some corner of our hearts gets not only hard and embittered but poisoned forever."

On the other hand: we do feel anger, sorrow and pain when we are hurt. And our body and soul remembers just as well as our mind does. So pretending to forgive does not help either. Putting on a mask of forgiveness doesn't take people and their history seriously.

If we want to forgive, we must first of all face the damage that has been done. It is no good to minimize and brush off the pain! If we want to forgive we have to feel and bear the anger, grief, and vulnerability that arise when we have been hurt. Of course we'd prefer to skip this step. It is not pleasant to feel pain or to admit that "Yes, we do mind and it does hurt."

I wonder if Jesus was able, in the midst of his agony on the cross, to say "Father forgive them..." because he was also able to cry out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus was straightforward with his companions and with God.

He wept, he laughed, he got angry, he asked for help, he felt anguish, he let himself be transparent... and he got hurt.

Because of that openness with God, that willingness to give his whole self, all his feelings, the whole range of human experience – Jesus was able to ground himself in compassion.

If we want to learn to forgive, we must be willing to make a large space in our prayer time to let ourselves – and God – know the whole range of what we feel.

We must resist only allowing what we think we should be feeling, but instead explore what is actually in us.

Maybe gradually we can then learn to sit in God's presence with our anger and our sorrow, and wait for God to show us what else we need to see.

Forgiveness requires honesty and self-examination. A scapegoat doesn't do. Truth requires that I take into account my own responsibility.

In what way did I contribute to the situation? Am I angry with someone in order to avoid noticing how guilty I feel and how angry I am at myself? Am I outraged by a behaviour in someone else that I fail to recognize as my own? Am I projecting my own faults on someone else?

Our struggle to forgive someone else may bring us face to face with our own difficulty in forgiving ourselves and accepting God's forgiveness.

Finally, forgiveness depends on prayer. In our prayer we can listen attentively to Jesus praying for us on the cross. We can listen to Jesus' word of forgiveness, as we bring before him our greed, pride, and impatience, our guilt and shame.

When we stand near the cross, discovering how much we are loved, we receive not only the forgiveness we need, we receive the power and courage to forgive others. It is when we realize that we are both sinful and forgiven that the power arises in us to forgive others.

And we can go one step further. We can listen to Jesus' words of forgiveness as we bring before him our enemies, those people we most fear and despise. Jesus is constantly there – not only for us, but also for them. ...pleading that God's love and mercy be at the centre of our lives and theirs.

Can we pray to see our enemies as God sees them?

It is not an easy prayer. And you may resist praying it...

But when I pray to see the other person through the eyes of God, I slowly begin to see that the other person is wounded, hurting, and imperfect, as I am; sinning as I am; and yet loved by God as I am.

This realization changes everything. It affects our behaviour and our response. It sets us free from thoughts of revenge and hatred. It enables us to look for creative solutions to conflict and to seek new ways of healing wounds.

Forgiveness is like a stream that pours out at the centre of our being through the power of the cross.

We can't force it or grasp it any more than we can hold a river. But we can pray for it and do what we can to be open to it. And we can accept the fact that forgiveness is almost never a single event but a process.

The three suggestions offered here – to face and feel our anger and sadness, to examine ourselves honestly, and to pray – can be guidelines on our journey toward forgiveness. While we do what we can, God does his or her part. We may be called to offer an apology, to confront a wrong, to look for non-violent ways to stop injustice. But God is always calling us to travel the inward journey, too... and succeed in learning to forgive.

I would like to ask myself in prayer:

Where am I locked in bitterness, hatred or resentment?

Where have I become as hard as stone?

Can I let go old resentments?

Where am I swallowing anger, sorrow, or fear and pretending that everything is fine?

Have I got the courage to admit my suffering?

What are the tears that I need to shed? Can I share them with Jesus? Ask him for healing? Ask him to hold what is more than I can bear?

Where do I need God's forgiveness?

Who are the people from whom I need to seek forgiveness?

Hearing Jesus' ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"*** can I hear him pray for me?

How do I respond?

We are all called to forgive. Really forgive.

We are called to be witnesses of God's love and forgiveness in a world that needs them more than anything else.

Let us pray for the grace to live by these words from the cross:

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

Amen.

## Prayer

Jesus, from a place of agony  
as death drew near,  
you offered surprising words of life.  
Words of tenderness -  
elevating our human condition  
in their invitation to move beyond  
our imprisoning angers -  
to that place where  
all souls can sing of freedom  
in the light of your forgiveness.  
Amen. (Peter Millar)