

'Father, forgive them', Luke 23. 34. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 16 June 2010.

Our reading for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke chapter 23. Verses 33 and 34 of that chapter read, 'When they came to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him ... and Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"'

Last week I brought to a conclusion our meditations on the seven 'I am' passages in John's gospel. And this week it falls to me to launch a new series – again of seven studies – on the sayings of our Lord during the last few hours before He died – the so-called 'Seven Sayings From The Cross'.

To some extent, the first and the last of these seven sayings act as bookends to the rest, in that they, the first and the last, are both prayers beginning with the address, 'Father' – the last being, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'. For, although, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah long before, when He, the Lamb of God, was oppressed and afflicted, He was silent before men,¹ He was certainly not silent before God.

And this – the first prayer of the Lord Jesus – was remarkable in many ways – not least on account of what He did *not* say.

For, although the normal and natural response to suffering which one does not deserve would have been hatred and cursing, the Saviour did not call for any form of revenge or retaliation.

Not only so, but, even given that He didn't call down judgement on those responsible for His many pains, neither, in this, His first prayer, did He ask anything for Himself. Most certainly He did not plead, as many others have done when facing death, for His own forgiveness. His prayer was 'Father, forgive *them*', not 'forgive *me*'! And this for the simple reason that, as the apostle Peter once said concerning the 'Christ' who 'suffered', He 'committed no sin'.² But He, who had no sin of His own for which to crave forgiveness, prayed for the forgiveness of others.

Indeed, no less than three of His seven sayings from the cross focused on the needs of others. Here He thought of the needs of those we might well label His murderers, soon after of the needs of Mary, His mother, and, finally, the deep spiritual needs of a repentant malefactor. What a wonderful Saviour – that in His hour of extreme anguish and pain, He should concern Himself with the needs of others, whether those of murderer, mother or malefactor.

But if our Lord's prayer was remarkable on account of what He did not say – either to request the punishment of His tormentors or to desire any favour from God for Himself – it was no less remarkable on account of what He *did* ask ... namely, for the forgiveness of the men immediately responsible for Him suffering as He did. And the fact that He prayed for their forgiveness was proof positive that He had already forgiven them Himself.

Oh yes, we know that this wasn't the first time He extended His forgiveness to others. We have only to think, for instance of His words, 'your sins are forgiven', spoken both to the paralysed man let down through the opened roof by his four friends,³ and to the woman Luke described as 'a sinner', who ventured into the house of a Pharisee to wash our Lord's feet.⁴ But this case was very different!

For, on this occasion, the objects of the Saviour's forgiveness were the very men responsible for His horrendous scourging, for the cruel mockery to which He had been subjected, for the spitting and the crown of thorns, and now for the iron spikes driven through both His hands and feet. What marvellous compassion in praying for these very men. It was the apostle Peter who said of Him, not only, as we just saw, 'who committed no sin', but 'who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not'.⁵

Some years before, He, the Lord Jesus, had commanded His disciples, 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'⁶ – and, as I guess you would expect, He practised what He preached.

But, whether we think of the paralysed man, of the woman who 'was a sinner', or of these Roman soldiers charged with His execution, it is clear that our Lord attached tremendous importance to people – whether men or women – being forgiven. And indeed, it was to make that forgiveness possible that He had not only once come into the world, but had now permitted the soldiers to crucify Him – to crucify the One 'who', as the apostle Peter said again, 'bare our sins in His own body on the tree',⁷ and in so doing to lay the just basis for men and women to be forgiven.⁸ For our Lord knew well that the forgiveness of sin did not come cheap.

Several years ago, I quoted in this room a true story I had then recently read in a book by an American preacher. Let me read the passage again ... 'Years ago Nancy [his wife] and I were about to enter an antique shop when she pulled me aside. I had our baby daughter in a contraption suspended from my back, and Nancy was eight months pregnant with another one. "Maybe *you'd* better stay outside", she said. "I've been inside this place before. I've seen the price tags. They have valuable pieces in there. There are signs all over the place: 'Don't touch!' And I know you. You'll go over to the rare books section and forget you have a baby on your back, and when you stop paying attention she'll break an incredibly expensive vase, and it will cost a fortune". "Excuse me", I said. "I'm thirty years

old, and I have a doctorate in psychology. I think I'll be able to handle a one-year-old for half an hour". "Fine. But I want it mutually understood that if she breaks something, it will come out of your allowance for the next twenty years". We went inside. I found the rare book section and started reading. I forgot all about the baby on my back. She lunged for something. I gasped. Nancy heard it and whirled round. But being eight months pregnant, her body extended far beyond its normal boundaries. She ended up knocking an incredibly expensive vase to the ground, shattering it. That was ten years ago. She's still paying'.⁹

And that is the point. For, as with that vase, forgiveness had to be paid for. Someone had to pick up the tag. When praying in our Breaking of Bread Service on Sunday morning, Graham quoted words from the New Testament, 'without the shedding of blood there is no remission'¹⁰ ... there is no forgiveness. And that is why the Lord Jesus went to the cross.

'Father, forgive them', Jesus prayed, adding, 'for they know not what they do'.¹¹

And how true those last words.

For, when they hammered nails through His hands and feet, these men little dreamt that they were fulfilling a prophecy written a thousand years before by King David, 'They pierced my hands and my feet'.¹²

They never guessed that the One whose life they had been charged with taking was none other than the Giver of life Himself – the One spoken of in the New Testament as the Author and Originator of life.¹³

Nor had they any idea that they were each playing an essential part in the offering up of the Lamb of God, a sacrifice of infinitely more value than the hundreds of thousands of lambs slain that very Passover time.¹⁴

Nor were they aware that they were crucifying, not only an innocent man – which even Pilate acknowledged the Lord Jesus to be – but, as the Bible says, crucifying 'the Lord of glory'.¹⁵

Nor for one moment did they suspect that the One they crucified between the two malefactors was the Creator Himself, whose all-powerful word had once brought into being the seed-bearing tree from which was descended the actual 'tree' on which they now 'hanged' Him.¹⁶

No, these things they did not know ... but He, the Lord Jesus, did ... and so do we.

But was His prayer for their forgiveness answered?

I think so. For, in His gospel, Matthew tells us that, immediately following our Lord's death, ... and I quote, ... 'the centurion and those with him ...feared greatly, saying, 'Truly this was the Son of God!' And I like to think that, as a result of our Lord's prayer for them, each of those soldiers left the scene of our Lord's crucifixion a changed man, believing Jesus to be the Son of God, and so with his sins forgiven.

May each of us leave this room today, believing Jesus to be the Son of God and so with *our* sins forgiven.

Footnotes

¹ Isa. 53. 7.

² 1 Pet. 2. 22.

³ Mark 2. 5.

⁴ Luke 7. 48.

⁵ 1 Pet. 2. 23.

⁶ Matt. 5. 44.

⁷ 1 Pet. 2. 24.

⁸ Rom. 3. 25-26.

⁹ John Ortberg, 'Love beyond Reason', page 56. Quoted in Coffee Morning on 7 June 2006.

¹⁰ Heb. 9. 22; cf. Matt. 26. 28.

¹¹ John tells us in his gospel that Pilate 'delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away', John 19. 16. They were simply obeying orders.

¹² Psa. 22. 16.

¹³ Acts 3. 15 literally.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 5. 7.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 2. 8.

¹⁶ And who placed the iron in the earth, Job 28. 2, which had been used to make the nails with which they pierced His hands and feet.