



“The First Word: Father, Forgive Them”

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Ash Wednesday

Luke 23:26-34

Tonight, and all the Sundays of Lent, will be uncomfortable. The event of Jesus on the cross and God’s connection to the crucified Christ is mysterious and tender and heavy. And we might feel as if we are lingering in the suffering of Jesus, remaining for the 40 days of Lent with the beaten, bruised, and betrayed Christ on the cross. I think that is exactly what we are supposed to experience in Lent... the intense pain and sacrifice that just won’t leave us be. But we will move through the seven last words of Jesus and end up at Easter with a bright and bold word, a word of beginning, of new hope, of starting again. By the time we reach the glorious resurrection, I hope these words from a crucified Christ would have been nailed into our souls – the abandonment, the thirst, the fear, the fatigue, and the loneliness – all of the words that connect us to the slain savior. And that will be the fertile ground from which a revived and resurrected hope will grow and flourish. So, we begin our journey into the seven last words of Jesus from the cross. May these seven sayings of our savior mark our hearts this Lenten season, just as the inky dust will mark our heads tonight.

The city of Coventry rests quietly in the middle of England. By the mid-20th Century it had become an important cog in the machinery of English industry. And in 1940 much of England’s munitions were being manufactured there. For, you see, war was raging over Europe, and bombs were falling over Britain. In the early evening of November 14, 1940, 515 German bombers began multiple bombing runs over Coventry. They dropped their bombs, returned to France to reload, and returned to drop some more. The first few waves of bombs were explosive in nature, designed to damage rooftops, roads, and water mains and to obstruct the actions of firefighters and other first responders. The succeeding waves of bombs were incendiary, intended to ignite the town in a firestorm. 4300 homes were damaged and over two-thirds of the city was destroyed.

The center of the city was dominated by the Coventry Cathedral, built on the site of a former Benedictine convent and dedicated to St. Michael. Its steeple towered over the city, an imposing landmark. By the end of that evening in November 1940, the steeple and the Cathedral’s outer walls were nearly all that remained of the holy structure. In the aftermath of the evening’s deathly destruction, a firefighter noticed two of the Cathedral’s massive roof beams lying in the shape of a cross amidst the rubble. These two beams were fixed together and placed on the altar, which was miraculously still standing. In the days that followed, the Provost of the Cathedral called the people of Coventry to a response of reconciliation, rather than retaliation and had the words “Father Forgive” engraved on the wall of the ruined church right behind the altar. The Germans, the English, the soldiers, the civilians... all needed to hear the words... “Father, Forgive!”

As I was researching these seven last words of Jesus in order to listen to what they have to say to us in Lent, I was drawn to longtime Duke Professor Stanley Hauerwas's initial thoughts on these words. He asks the reader to "recall holding a just-born infant, or think of an occasion when you cradled a sick and soon-to-die grandparent or elderly friend. We are drawn to embrace those we love, but they can be so precious, fragile, and beautiful that we fear to take hold of them. These cross-shaped words of Jesus, words uttered in agony, put us in a similar position. We are at once drawn to these words, but we fear taking them in our hands, realizing that we cannot comprehend their power."

What we will probably find in these seven last words this Lenten season is that the emotions and the sensations that Jesus felt on the cross are feelings we too experience every day. We feel thirst, and betrayal, and loneliness, and abandonment, and pain. But these words of Jesus are not simply ordinary. These words that we will hear over the next several weeks are not simply normal. As Hauerwas says, "This is the death of the Son of God, a death that encompasses death, challenging our assumption that we have or can 'come to terms with death' on our own terms. To comprehend this death, to be faced with these words, means life can never return to normal."

And so, knowing that life can never again be normal, we come to our first word, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." These words don't feel harsh at all. They feel like comfort to a weary soul, "Father, Forgive!" They feel like a balm to a broken spirit that just can't seem to get anything right. And we all crave forgiveness. Maybe by making this the first word in the seven last words of Christ on the cross, it is meant to ease us into the harsher words like "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Feeling abandoned by God is a rather big step for us to experience as we begin Lent. And so, we begin with these gentler words of forgiveness. Maybe this first word calls us to forgive someone who has wronged us? Maybe we are the ones who need forgiveness? Experiencing a forgiveness-granting Jesus is a better way to enter this Lenten Season than wondering about a God, a Father, who would abandon, punish, and condemn a son.

And I know on Ash Wednesday and during Lent we focus a lot on the death of Christ. And we might be tempted to focus on our own deaths as well, or the death of our sinful selves, the death that needs the forgiveness spoken by Christ so that we can enter eternity clean and whole. But I don't think Jesus is giving meaning to death here. As Bonhoeffer said, "Jesus's death and resurrection is not the solution to the problem of death. Rather this is the death of the Son of God!" These words we will experience during Lent are not first and foremost about us, although we can learn from them. This first word of Jesus, and many of the other words as well, is from the crucified Christ to the Creator God. We are merely bystanders, overhearing painful conversations between the Father and the Son. And those painful conversations are ones of deep and desperate love.

And what we are meant to see is the visible presence of the interior life of the Triune God. This first word draws us into the mystery of the Trinity and the relationship of the Godhead. And we are part of that dance. The suffering savior asked God to pull a broken and cruel humanity, a humanity that nailed him to a tree, into relationship with the divine. We see God's work on our behalf. We are made dance partners with the divine, members of the forgiveness and redemption of God.

There is a story of a Trappist monk, Christian de Cherge, who lived in a monastery in Algeria. Christian and his fellow monks knew their refusal to leave Algeria after the rise of Islamic radicals in 1993 might result in their deaths. Knowing that he would die, Christian left a letter with his family to be opened upon his death. In this testament, he asked that those who love him pray that he would be worthy of his sacrifice. He expressed the fear that his death would be used to persecute the Islamic people, his Muslim friends whom he had grown to love.

Christian ended his letter with this:

Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all those who dismissed me as naïve or idealistic: “Let him tell us what he thinks now.” But such people should know that my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able—if God pleases—to see the children of Islam as [God] sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God’s Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences. I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of, all odds. In this Thank You—which says everything about my life—I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, of my sisters and brothers—thank you a thousandfold. And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too I wish this thank-you, this “A-Dieu,” whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen! Insha Allah!

Christian de Cherge had been drawn into the life of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Divine Dance, the life nailed to the cross. And because Christian was such a part of God’s love he was able to see that all people, even the one who killed him, are loved by God and that forgiveness was even more important than his own life. And so, tonight, as we receive the ashes of mortality on our foreheads or on our hands, we are reminded that God sees our humanity, our mistakes, and our struggles and gazes upon us with a loving and longing look. God forgives us, even to the point of death. We are reminded of our own deaths so that we might live our lives this Lent with spirits of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In 1958, Canon Joseph Poole wrote The Litany of Reconciliation and today it is prayed regularly around the world. The Litany is intoned at noon each weekday in Coventry Cathedral and in the Cathedral ruins on Fridays:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

Father, forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,

Father, forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,

Father, forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,

Father, forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,

Father, forgive.

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,

Father, forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,

Father, forgive.

Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Amen.