

JESUS ON THE CROSS

Fleming Rutledge, who for more than 20 years worked as a parish priest in New York, published last year her a weighty tome of 670 pages entitled *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. There she wrote : “In the Episcopal Church, the sermons and meditations that were the centrepieces of these [Good Friday three-hour preaching services] have now been largely replaced by prayers and litanies, substantial interludes of music, short homilies (optional) and liturgical practices such as reverencing the cross and receiving the reserved sacrament. This devaluation of the preaching of the cross is, I believe, a serious deprivation for those who seek to follow Jesus” ¹(xvi)

Although this Good Friday service will eventually lead into the formal ‘Liturgy of the Cross’ at 2 pm, my understanding is that preaching is to be at the heart of the next 90 minutes. Nicholas, the Dean, told me that last year he preached three addresses, each of 20 minutes or so – and I intend to do the same. Yes, there will be a place for the singing of hymns, for the reading of the Scriptures, and for prayer – but my chief task is to preach on the wonder of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (Gal 2.20).

After a good deal of reflection, I want to do so by focussing on the three so-called ‘words’ that we find in Luke’s account of the Crucifixion:

**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing
Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise
Father, into your hands I commend my spirit**

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus* (Eerdmans 2015) xvi

LUKE 23.34: FORGIVENESS FOR ALL

What are the three key distinctives of each of the three Abrahamic faiths?

According to one scholar of world religions

- The key distinctive of Islam is prayer
- The key distinctive of Judaism is the family
- And the key distinctive of Christianity is – forgiveness!²

Contrast for instance the prayer of Elie Wiesel and the prayer of Jesus on the Cross.

- Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, at a ceremony commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz by the Russian army on 27 January 1945 prayed: “Although we know that God is merciful, please God do not have mercy on those who have created this place. God of forgiveness, do not forgive those murderers of Jewish children here... God, merciful God, do not have mercy on those who had no mercy on Jewish children.”
- By contrast Jesus prayed: **Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.** What an amazing prayer! So amazing that some have questioned whether Jesus actually prayed such a prayer. For instance, in my version of the NRSV this prayer is in double brackets – and a note at the bottom of the page reads: ‘*Other ancient authorities lack the sentence “Then Jesus said, ‘Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’”.*

Is this a true prayer of Jesus? It is found, for instance, in the great Codex Sinaiticus, one of the two earliest MSS of the New Testament as a whole, which was bought by the British Government from the Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1933 for the sum of a £1 million, and is one of the great treasures of the British Museum.

On the other hand, this verse is not found in Codex Vaticanus, the other earliest full MS, which is in the Vatican Library in Rome.

Along with many other scholars, I believe this is a genuine prayer of Jesus, and that it was deliberately omitted by a later copyist on the grounds that he felt that God could never have forgiven the Jews for crucifying the Saviour. Indeed, for him as for many other early Christians the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was a clear sign that God did not forgive the Jews.

But the reality is that Jesus did pray this prayer. True, it is an amazing prayer – indeed, the very amazing nature of the prayer is a sign of its genuineness.

So let’s look at this prayer in depth, as we do so we shall look at the prayer in its context.

2 Huston Smith quoted by William H. Willimon, *Thank God It’s Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross* (Abingdon, Nashville 2006) 10.

1. JESUS PRAYED FOR FORGIVENESS IN SPITE OF THE CROSS

Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’
(Luke 23.34).

Notice the little conjunction – “**then**”. It translates the shortest of Greek words – *de*. Omitted by many modern translators (e.g. GNB, NIV & REB), this two-letter word links the first word of Jesus with the context in which it is to be found.

And, of course, the context is the crucifixion itself: “**Two others also, who were criminals, were lead 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**” (23.32-34).

Significantly none of the Gospel writers makes a big deal of the act of crucifixion. Unlike Mel Gibson and his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, they do not go into all the gory detail. Indeed, there is no gore at all.

There is just the simple statement: “**they crucified him**”.

But, of course, they didn’t need to go into the detail.

Everybody knew what an appalling form of death it was.

Cicero, the famous Roman orator who lived in the first century before Christ, said that crucifixion was “the most cruel and horrifying punishment” ever known to man.

Listen to James Edwards description of crucifixion in his recent commentary on Luke:

“Every totalitarian regime needs a terror apparatus, and crucifixion was Rome’s terror apparatus *ad horrendum*, infamous alike for its infliction of pain and shame.

Reserved for non-Roman citizens, crucifixion unleashed maximum cruelty on the lowest and most defenceless classes of society – slaves, violent criminals, and prisoners of war. At the defeat of the slave rebellion under Spartacus in 71 BC, Crassus crucified more than 6000 slaves along the Via Appia between Capua and Rome. To enhance the deterrent effect of the guilty, victims were executed as public spectacles. ‘Whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this fear’ wrote Quintillian’.”³

Have you got the picture? An Isis beheading compared to a crucifixion is a picnic. Crucifixion is the most barbaric form of torture known to man.

"The Assyrians invented it, but their method was too quick. They merely impaled you on a sharpened stake, up the anus, through the body, and out through the mouth. You didn't last long. So the Romans perfected it, dragged it out longer, refined it, in order to let you have a little time to meditate upon your crimes. By the second or third day, four fifths crazed as the crows peck your eyes out, maybe (or so the Romans calculated) you'll act as a fairly effective deterrent to other would-be opponents of the regime."⁴

3 James Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Apollos, Nottingham 2015) 685.

It was a ghastly way of dying. "The unnatural position of the body made every movement a pain. The suspension of the whole body on jagged iron nails driven through the most sensitive nerve centres of the wrists and ankles, ensured constant exquisite torture. The wounds of the nails and the weals from the lash soon became inflamed and even gangrenous. The body's position hindered circulation and caused indescribable pain in the chest. A raging thirst set in, brought on by the burning sun. The flies were thick around the victim. The agony of crucifixion was terrible beyond words."⁵

This is the context in which Jesus said: '**Father, forgive them**'. What an amazing word were from the cross – it's a prayer that almost beggars belief.

How could someone ask God to forgive such a dreadful and heinous crime?

For this is God's Son who is there on the Cross. How could God forgive?

What father would want to forgive the killers of his beloved son or indeed daughter?

"But", as Walter Brueggemann points out, "Jesus knows the heart of the Father, who is at bottom a forgiver".⁶ The God of the Bible Jesus knew is supremely a God who forgives.

- In Psalm 103 we read that God is the one "**who forgives all your iniquities**" (103.2); "**he does not deal with according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities; ... as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us**" (103.10, 12).
- God says in Isaiah 43.25: "**I am He who blots out your transgressions... I will not remember your sins**".

Yes the good news is that God does forgive the unpardonable. As John says in his First Letter: "**The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin**" (1.7).

"**Father forgive them**", prayed Jesus. Cardinal Basil Hume, the former Roman Catholic Bishop of Westminster, commented: "Were there ever words so sweet to the ears of those burdened and weighed down by wrong-doing and sin".⁷

It doesn't matter who we are and what we have done, we are never beyond the reach of God's love. The only sin which is unforgiveable is when we refuse to accept the gift of forgiveness which God offers

2.JESUS PRAYED FOR FORGIVENESS REPEATEDLY

4 Michael Saward, *Don't Miss The Party* (Scripture Union, London 1974) 41-42.

5 Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (IVP, Leicester 1974) 23.

6 Walter Brueggemann, *Into your hand: Confronting Good Friday* (SCM Press, London 2015) 3.

7 Basil Hume, *Seven Last Words* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2009)16.

“Then Jesus said, Father forgive.....” We began by looking at the context of the prayer; let me now direct your attention to the tense Luke employs to introduce the prayer.

In our English versions **“Then Jesus said”** is the standard translation.

The English versions suggest that we have here what grammarians call a ‘simple’ past, which denotes a one-off action. For instance, in the immediately previous verse Luke tells us **“they crucified”** Jesus: and in doing so he uses a simple past tense (a Greek aorist) – for this is clearly a one-off action.

But significantly Luke does not use a simple past tense when he introduces Jesus’ prayer for forgiveness. He uses the Greek ‘imperfect’ tense (*elegon*) which describes an ongoing action in the past. In other words, we should translate the underlying Greek not as “Jesus said”, but rather “Jesus was saying” or “Jesus kept on saying”.

In other words, Jesus on the cross repeatedly prayed for forgiveness of those who were responsible for his death.

I wonder, are we to imagine that Jesus prayed for forgiveness each time as one of the nails was driven into his hands, and then into his feet?

Indeed, if it is not too blasphemous, are we to imagine that Jesus struggled to forgive – that in the intensity of the pain he was tempted not to forgive – and that he countered the temptation by crying out yet again, **“Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”**.

As some of you here may know, where pain and hurt are ongoing, sometimes we need to forgive and forgive and forgive. Forgiveness for many Christians has often to be an ongoing process. Sometimes we need to keep on praying, ‘Father forgive’.

The fact is that forgiveness is not easy – it is not easy for us, and it certainly will not have been easy for Jesus.

Jesus did not glibly say **“Father forgive”**. It took tremendous courage, and amazing grace.

3. JESUS PRAYED FOR US ALL

So let’s look at the prayer itself: **“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”**. To whom was Jesus referring when he said **“them”**? For whom did Jesus pray? Who needed his forgiveness? Who was responsible for putting him to death on a cross?

1. The Roman soldiers actually put Jesus to death. When Luke writes **“they crucified him”** (23.22) the context makes it quite clear that the soldiers are the subject. It was they who nailed Jesus to the cross. They were Jesus’ executioners. Yet the truth is that they were but pawns. They were doing only what they had been told. Had they refused to carry out their orders, then they too would have been crucified.
2. Pilate actually **“gave the verdict”** (23.24) at Jesus’ trial. As the Roman governor of the province of Judea he alone could determine the death sentence. Crucifixion was not a Jewish form of execution, but a Roman form. Without Pilate there would have been no crucifixion. And yet the reality is that Pilate wanted to release Jesus (23.20) – and would have done so had he not been bullied into sentencing Jesus to death.
3. The people who really wanted Jesus dead were the Jewish religious leaders. They saw Jesus as a threat to their power and wanted rid of him. So Luke begins his story of the passion with the words: **“The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a**

way to put Jesus to death" (22.2). But their hands were tied because of public opinion. They needed someone to betray Jesus

4. So you could blame Judas for the death of Jesus. It was Judas who led the temple police to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (22.47); it was Judas who in the dark of that night identified Jesus by going up and giving him a kiss (22.4). And yet Judas was only a willing pawn used by the Jewish leaders. It was they who brought Jesus before Pilate (23.1) on the trumped up charge that Jesus claimed to be "**a king**" (23.2).
5. But was it really Judas? A close examination shows that it was the crowd who were actually responsible for the death of Jesus. It was they who kept on insisting with Pilate that Jesus should be crucified. "**Crucify, crucify him**" they shouted (23.21). It was "**their voices**" which "**prevailed**" (23.24). Yes, said Luther, it was the Jewish people who were to blame for the death of Jesus. "What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?" asked Luther. "I shall give you my advice. First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools... Secondly, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed... Third, I advise that their prayer books and Talmudic writings... be taken from them."⁸ But Luther was wrong, dreadfully wrong. The crowd who probably numbered less than 100 people, were in no way representative of the Jewish people as a whole than Judas was representative of the 12 disciples as a whole
6. The fact is that no one person and no one group is to blame. Indeed, if we set the Cross within a wider context, we can say that all of us had a hand in the crucifixion of Jesus. All of us had a hand in driving the nails into his hands and feet. It was because of us that Jesus died. As the writer to the Hebrews put it, whenever we turn from the way of Christ we "**are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt**" (Hebs 6.6.). All of us are guilty of the death of Jesus. In the words of Gerald O' Collins, a distinguished Jesuit, "Universal solidarity in the radical disorder of sin allows us to speak of a collective guilt shared by all. The crucifixion has all the appearance of an event for which particular men took responsibly, but which at the same time was outside their control. It was under the control of that primal lust for evil which lays its hand on everyone."⁹ 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' the old Negro spiritual asks. And we must answer: 'Yes, we were there' – there not just as by-standers but as guilty participants.

In other words, when Jesus said "**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing**", he prayed to the Father for us too. We are included in the "**them**".

Here is wonderful news. Jesus wants to set you and me free from the power of our sins.

With Jesus the slate can be wiped clean. With Jesus we can begin again.

'Ransomed, healed, restored forgiven, who like me his praise should sing?'

4. JESUS PRAYED FOR FORGIVENESS UNCONDITIONALLY

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

⁸ Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543).

⁹ Gerald O' Collins, *The Calvary Christ* (SCM, London 1977) 66.

Notice, there are no preconditions. Jesus did not say, ‘Forgive them once they show remorse – forgive them once they say sorry – forgive them once they acknowledge their role in my death’. Long before we ever faced up to our sin, let alone sought his forgiveness, Jesus prayed for us. In the words of the American Methodist William H. Willimon, Jesus engaged in ‘pre-emptive forgiveness’.¹⁰

Today we are familiar with the concept of ‘pre-emptive bombing’, in which a nation under threat instead of waiting for the enemy to attack, takes the initiative and bombs the enemy before the enemy launches its attack.

Pre-emptive forgiveness similarly doesn’t wait for an offender to ask for forgiveness: it takes the initiative and forgives, whatever. Jesus didn’t wait for us to say sorry – he ‘seized the initiative’ (Brueggemann) and said: ‘Father forgive’.

Such a prayer seems to some unreasonable.

- Norman Tebbit, the Conservative politician who lost his wife in the IRA bombing of a Brighton hotel, said: ‘Forgiveness is not a one-way street. The transgressor cannot be forgiven unless he acknowledges the evil of what he has done and shows remorse and repentance...I can no more forgive a sinner who does not repent than a priest.’
- Anthony Bash, an Anglican clergyman, who gave this example, commented: “I suggest that to offer forgiveness in such a situation is absurd, because the supposed act of forgiveness lacks integrity as a morally reasonable act.”¹¹

Jesus prayed for forgiveness – unconditionally.

When Jesus said, “**Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing**”, he was not making forgiveness dependent on our ignorance.

Jesus was not saying, “Father, forgive them because they are not really to be held culpable, for they don’t rationally know what they are doing”.

Rather, he was saying “Father forgive them, for among other things, they don’t know what they are doing”. Willimon put it this way:

“If God is going to wait until we know the wrong that we do, God will wait forever. If you are awaiting me to know, to admit, to confess my complicity, my sin, you will wait an eternity, and I am not eternal.... If God’s going to wait to talk with me until I first admit that I’m a sinner, the conversation will never occur. I’ll be too defensive, too deceitful in my guilt. I’d rather die.”¹²

The fact is that if God had waited for us to say sorry, there would have been no cross.

This is not to deny there is a place for saying sorry – it is a matter of when we say sorry.

5, WE TOO NEED TO PRAY THIS PRAYER

10 Willimon, *Thank God It’s Friday* 6

11 Anthony Bash, *Just Forgiveness, Exploring the Bible, Weighing the Issues* (SPCK, London 2011) 8.

12 *Thank God It’s Friday*, 8.

Raymond E. Brown, a distinguished American Roman Catholic scholar, has written that the real problem is not “the absence of this prayer from the text, but the failure to incorporate it into ones heart has been the real problem”.¹³ He quoted David Flusser, a German Orthodox Jew academic, who drew attention to the way in which the Crusaders quoted to the Jews an apocryphal word of the Lord, ‘There will yet come the day when my sons will come and revenge my blood’. Yet, he said, in their Latin New Testament the Crusaders could find presented as a genuine word of the Lord Luke 23.34a – a word that should have given them a very different outlook!

If only our so-called Christian forbears had taken the prayer of Jesus seriously, relationships between Christians and Jews could have been so very different!

The way Jesus prayed is a challenge to the way we pray
We too need to forgive – however hurt we may have been, however unjust others may have been, however blind others may be to the pain and the wrong that they have done to us.
There is no limit to Christian forgiveness.

Remember, that to forgive is not to excuse.
Indeed, C.S. Lewis put it this way: “To be a Christian is to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you”.¹⁴

Furthermore, if we are to go the way of Jesus, then we too need to take pre-emptive action. A failure on the part of an offending party to see their need for forgiveness does not lessen our need to forgive. Sometimes it is precisely the fact that we are willing to forgive, which shames the other to say sorry.

There was a time when I struggled with this issue of pre-emptive forgiveness. I had been the victim of what I perceived had been a grave injustice, and as a result I looked for those who done the dirty on me to face up to face up to the wrong they had done and say sorry. But they couldn’t see the wrong they had done. Or rather, like Oedipus, they had blinded themselves to the horror of the situation – to face up to reality was too painful for them. In this context my father wrote me a long letter, which included the following reflections:

“The prayer, ‘Father, forgive them...’ was prayed in the act of crucifixion – and persisted in the resurrection. ‘Beginning at Jerusalem’ (Luke 24.47), the place of rejection, was part of the missionary commission implying, ‘for I love them still, though guilty’. You have seen the memorial altar of Coventry in the old ruins of the original cathedral. When it was first erected the words were, ‘Father forgive them’. I saw them with my own eyes. The next time I went, the word ‘them’ was erased. This was clearly due to recognition that we are also sinners, for whom Christ died, and having been forgiven for our sins we are called to unconditional forgiveness. That is made possible by unconditional love..... Certainly to know that grace demands repentance from the sinner, but the overwhelming fact that wins us sinners is to learn

13 Raymond E. Brown *The Death of the Messiah: Volume Two* (Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994) 980

14 C.S. Lewis, *Fernseed & Elephants* 42, 43

that God *still* loves us in our sin and rebellion, for the cross is a demonstration of the everlasting love and mercy of God. And that is what we are called to do.”

Forgiveness is a mark of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught us to pray: "**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others**" (Luke 11.4; Matt 6.12).

Jesus said: "**Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses**" (Mark 11.25).

Jesus even said that the forgiveness of others was to be unlimited: even "**seventy times seven**" (Matt 18.12: see also Luke 17.3-4).

What is more, there are no ‘let-out’ clauses when it comes to forgiveness. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “He doesn’t say that we are to forgive other people’s sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don’t, we shall be forgiven none of our own.”¹⁵

As Jesus prayed, “**Father forgive**”, so we too are to pray “Father, forgive”.

15 C.S. Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants* (first published in 1975; this edition Fount, London 1998) 39, 40