"Father, Forgive Them" -- Luke 23:32-34

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho

28 January Anno Domini 2001
Ash Wednesday
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"Yea, dogs are round about Me; a company of evildoers encircle Me;
they have pierced My hands and feet" (Psalm 22:16).

Dear Baptized,

The soul who seeks to behold the depths of the LORD God's love need only, by means of the Sacred Scriptures, sojourn at the foot of the cross whereon Jesus the Christ is suspended and listen to the words spoken by Him. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the Son and has caused these utterances to be written and read, for "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Among these words of Christ crucified for the sins of the world are two perfect prayers, four gracious declarations and one unfathomable question. On this Ash Wednesday, our ears hearken to the words spoken by God Incarnate just after He was nailed to the cross by the men of this world. The text is Luke 23:32-34 and the sermon is titled ...

"Father, forgive them."

"Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place which is called ‘The Skull,' there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'"

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world is forced from the Holy City and driven outside the gate of Jerusalem and into the wilderness of this earth, to a cursed place called "The Cranium" or "The Skull" for behold, the hands of man have crowned His Head with thorns and the Hand of God is laid on the Head of the Scapegoat with the sins of humanity being reckoned unto Christ Jesus. Immanuel is "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12) as the evil-doers join Jesus on His way to Golgotha where one criminal will be crucified at His right and the other at His left. There, at that place, Jesus Christ, "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary" was crucified.

Perhaps you have seen the moving and thought-provoking painting called "St. John's Christ on the Cross" by Salvadore Dali. It is a fascinating work of art. As you look at the top of the work you are viewing the crucified Jesus from above - from a perch located in the heavens and seeing Christ on the cross below you - from the perspective that we might imagine God the Father having. As for the

Son of God in the painting, His sacred head is tilted forward and down, as if looking at the mountains and sea and world beneath Him.

Jesus looks down from the cross and sees a fallen world; especially the sin-ladened souls who are responsible for His crucifixion. God the Father looks down and sees the same world; particularly the same people. But in addition, He beholds His Only- Begotten and dearly Beloved Son. There, suspended between Heaven and earth is the God-man, Jesus the Christ. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'" Here, pinned between the deep beyond the universe and the land pock- marked by the graves of the dead is the Son of God and Son of Man. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'"

The Son addresses His Father in prayer. The Son beseeches His Father, not for Himself as He suffers unimaginable pain of body, spirit and soul, but for others. Jesus petitions His Father Who is in heaven, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

But for whom is Jesus praying here? Is it not for those who do not know what they do? This is certainly the answer for it comes from the mouth of the Lord. The Roman soldiers did not know that they were pounding nails into the hands and feet of God. The Centurion did not know that this was the Son of Man. The Jewish leaders did not know that this was the Messiah. Pilate did not know that this was His Savior Whom he had condemned to death. In fact, anyone associated with Jesus' death did not know what they were doing.

But what is causing the Christ's Blood to flow from His sacred veins and what is responsible for His awful suffering and hellish pain? Is it not the sins of the world? This is certainly the answer for it comes from the Word of God. Jesus' offering is "for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Here the Christ "offered for all time a single Sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:12). All transgressions of God's Holy and Righteous Law - whether of deed or word or thought - whether of commission or omission - whether known or unknown - all sins were cast upon Him "and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Us! Did you hear that word? "And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of US all." You stand at the foot of the cross and you hear that your sins were laid on Jesus and You behold His Blood for you - His pain for you - His suffering for you - His Sacrifice for you. Then it comes to you and you say to yourself, "But I didn't realize; I did not know that I am responsible for this. Oh God, I deserve this cursing, not Him. Oh how could I?"

Do not despair, dear soul, for the Son of God has ascended this altar of the cross on your behalf. Listen to Him, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." You are not only one of those included in those who did not know what they were doing, you are also and especially one of "them" and what Good News this is for you. "Father, forgive them." Even from your cross 2,000 years ago, He had you in mind and was interceding for you in His prayer. What you could not do, namely atone for your sins; the High Priest has done for you, offering Himself in your place and He petitions, "Father, forgive them."

Forgive the Jew and the Gentile, the Pharisee and the pastor, the infant and the aged, the slave and the free, the rich and the poor, the male and the female, the hooker and the Virgin, the African and the American, the sick and the well, the fearful and the courageous - "Father, forgive them."

Forgiveness is what you and I need in order to be right with God and forgiveness for the whole world is what flows from the Word of the cross. Behold how important and serious forgiveness is to your Lord. Dearly beloved in Christ, the Good News is not a doctrine ABOUT forgiveness. The Gospel IS forgiveness - earned by Jesus then - declared yours now. This Gospel has been given to and remains entrusted to the Church and is the blessed task of her pastors and His stewards.

God has called you in Baptism to be His own "by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit which He poured out upon" (Titus 3:5-6) you richly through Jesus Christ your Savior. In a few minutes you will hear the forgiveness of sins proclaimed to you once more in the Holy Absolution when the undershepherd leads you in order that "repentance to the forgiveness of sins ... be preached in His Name to all nations" (Luke 24:47) and especially here in this place to you. "Father, forgive them." That Blood-bought remission of sins is in the Cup of Blessing and His Body broken for you on the cross is here this night.

From the cross the High Priest speaks this Word first and it is a prayer to His Father ... "Father, forgive them." Will He not do so, granting His perfect absolution? Will God the Father not hear the petition of His Son as begins the atoning Sacrifice? "Father, charge each sin to Me; forgive them. Place each transgression on Me; forgive them. Though I be forsaken by You, I petition You, forgive them."

Surely the Father has heard the prayer of His Son. For though it cost Christ His Life and though Jesus was poured out unto death, yet we know that the Savior's prayer was answered and is answered because the LORD did raise Him from the dead on the third day and the LORD does forgive us all our sins. Surely the Father has heard and answered this prayer as the Scriptures declare. "'Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Thy Name.' Then a Voice came from Heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (John 12:27-28).

"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'" Dearly beloved, in the next half minute, I will announce aloud in this room every sin for each and every one of you that has not been atoned for by Jesus Christ, and, I will declare every sin for each and every one of you for which there is no forgiveness.

(silence for 30 seconds)

"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the Blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great Priest over the House of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our Hope without wavering, for He Who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:19-25). Amen.