

Good Friday 30th March 2018 Cathedral, Grahamstown 12 noon	Transformation, healing and the cross of Christ
	<p style="text-align: right;">Luke 23:34</p>
1st Word – Father, forgive them...	

“There were two others with Jesus, criminals who were being led out to execution; and when they reached the place called The Skull, they crucified him there, and the criminals with him, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.’” (Luke 23:32-34)

1. The crucifixion

When a criminal reached the place of crucifixion, his cross was laid flat on the ground. Sometimes the cross was shaped like a T, with no top piece against which the head could rest. The victim’s arms were stretched out on the cross bar, and the nails driven through his hands or wrists. The feet were either nailed or tied to the cross. Half way up the cross there was a projecting piece of wood – like a small saddle – to take the weight of the criminal, otherwise the nails would have torn through his hands. Then the cross was lifted and set upright in its socket. Usually it was quite low – with the criminal’s feet less than a metre above the ground. The agony of the victim had only just begun, and could last for hours, even days. There was the agony of trying to breathe, with arms stretched out and all the weight on them. The action of the soldiers in breaking the legs of the two thieves after only about 6 hours meant that they died from suffocation, because they could no longer push themselves up to breathe. Without that cruel mercy, the person would eventually die from loss of blood, or thirst, or exhaustion, the living victim of birds who would come and peck out his eyes, and passers-by who would mock and jeer. It was possible for a person to survive up to a week, before death finally came¹ It was brutal, long drawn out agony, torture beyond words.

¹ Barclay, *Luke*, 284

It was in that context that Jesus spoke the first of the seven words from the cross: Father, forgive them... Words spoken from the place of suffering, the place of helplessness, the place of pain. Yet in doing so, he moved from being a helpless victim to being someone who set others free... and in doing that, he set himself free also.

This Word speaks to us of our need of forgiveness; and our need to forgive.

2. Our need of forgiveness

It is a word to us, because we need to be forgiven.

Deeply rooted in OT and NT is the idea of right and wrong; that in crossing those boundaries, breaking those laws, we are not only sinning against our neighbour, we are also sinning against God; and that we need to make amends, do something that wipes away our guilt, that puts things right.

A child who has broken a treasured cup, or was playing with matches and caused a serious fire... and has done immense damage – there is the need to say, “I am sorry.” And to acknowledge that the action has caused damage, hurt. That needs to happen for the relationship with the family, with the community, to be healed and restored.

This picture of a damaged relationship goes back to Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen 3); they hide from God because they have broken that relationship. We share in the sin of Adam. The relationship needs to be restored.

All through the OT are the sacrifices, the sin offerings, to take away our sin. To carry the burden of guilt. To set us free, usually through the shedding of blood. Is it not remarkable that putting things right should occupy so much of our energy, time, resources! Does that not say something?

Christ's death on the cross is a blood offering, the perfect sacrifice, offered once for all, to take away our sin. That we might be forgiven. Because we need to be forgiven, and set free.

The place of the cross in the redeeming work of Christ. The cross is the climax. It is the symbol of Christian forgiveness. "When he suffered, he did not threaten, but trusted in him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed..." (1 Peter 2:23-24)

3. Forgiving others

One day, Peter asked Jesus, "How often should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As much as seven times (remembering that seven was the perfect number)?" "No - seventy times seven!" And then follows the parable of the unforgiving servant, who ends up in prison. "In the same way your heavenly Father will deal with you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

So in speaking those words of forgiveness, Jesus was living out his own teaching.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us..." Mt 6:12 – the Lord's Prayer – and then in the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Lord's Prayer are followed by a comment:

"For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done." Mt 6:14-15

"If when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar, go and find your brother, make peace with your brother, your sister, then then come and offer your gift..." (Mt 5:21-26) - go the extra mile to make peace, to reconcile...

Stephen, the first Christian martyr: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Acts 7:60

St Paul: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Eph 4:32)

No family, no relationship between spouse, siblings, no community, can survive without forgiveness, forgiving one another...

To forgive is to release, to let go of bitterness; resentment. To forgive is to set free – both myself, and the other. When we forgive, we make it possible for the relationship to continue. To forgive is to pick up the pieces and start again. To forgive is a sign and work of grace. To forgive is to break the steel cage that encases our hearts; to forgive is to open the prison doors. The word of Jesus from the cross is a word of liberation. Father, forgive them...

4. Transformation, healing and forgiveness

And yet... to forgive is so contrary to our natural instincts. Someone hurts us, and we vow revenge – for ever! Someone is murdered, and we don't sleep until the murderer is arrested and put in prison. A close friend of ours from Wellington was badly assaulted some years back, in trying to protect her neighbour from attack – the neighbour was killed. Is forgiveness even an option in such cases? We are determined to see justice done, that wrongdoers are put away, are punished – where is forgiveness? Does forgiveness mean that we simply let the person go free? For someone who has been abused or raped – what does forgiveness mean? Do we even dare use the word, raise the possibility? The anger and outrage on campus from rape victims, and the response of those accused of rape – the Reference List protests of 2016.

And, in the history of our country, with so much hurt done and experienced over the years, dare we even talk the language of forgiveness? Was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) a futile exercise that let people off the hook with the language of

forgiveness, but didn't actually change anything? Land restitution? Expropriation without compensation? What does forgiveness mean, for us as a nation?

Can the cross of Christ offer us a path to transformation and healing? Can forgiveness open the door?

There is the danger of us misusing forgiveness.

This is a particular challenge for the church/Christians as we face up to our own sins and failures, particularly in cases where those in leadership have abused their position, with what has been called “an abdication of accountability” and “an inadequate theological understanding of forgiveness”. A priest, a bishop, a pastor, a lay leader, does something that causes immense damage and hurt, but because we speak so readily the language of forgiveness, we are reluctant to hold people accountable for their actions - particularly in cases of substance abuse, or sexual abuse. We say, because we think we must say it, “we forgive you”, but meanwhile that forgiveness is not accompanied by transformation and healing. The forgiveness a person receives cannot be a licence to continue with their wrongdoing.

We must rediscover the power of forgiveness to not only set free, but also to transform, to heal, to change us. “Father, forgive them...” must go with the words “Go, and sin no more.”

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness opens the door for transformation and healing. It makes new relationships possible. It is the language of reconciliation; of making friends where once we were enemies; of discovering that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, through our baptism; that we are in this together, not as enemies, but sharing the burden with one another – but it starts with forgiveness: acknowledging our share in what has gone wrong; letting go as far as possible our hurt; receiving the gift of mercy, giving mercy in return. Making it possible for us all to begin

again, a new start. Restitution. Putting right. Restoring what was taken. The Zaccheus moment.

To forgive, to receive forgiveness, is to return to the cross of Christ; to hear his words spoken to us; and in turn to speak them and own them and live them.

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The prayer:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, in in penitence we confess that we have sinned against you, through our own fault, in thought, word and deed, and in what we have left undone. For the sake of your son, Christ our Lord, forgive us all that is past, and grant that we may serve you in newness of life, to the glory of your name.”

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy on you; pardon your sins and set you free from them; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.