

1st Sunday of Lent – February 29 and March 1, 2020 – The Seven Last Words of Jesus – “Father, Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do”

During these Sundays of Lent, instead of preaching this year from the readings for that particular Sunday, I turn for my subject to Calvary and the cross and Jesus' Seven Last Words that He uttered.

Jesus was a traveling preacher and He gave many sermons. In Matthew's gospel, He stood in the pulpit of the mountain for His most famous sermon: “Blessed are the poor in spirit;” “Blessed are the meek;” “Blessed are the pure in heart;” “Blessed are the peacemakers.” In Luke's account, He stood on the plain among His people and told them how they should treat one another with respect: “I say to you that hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

But for His last and greatest sermon, a sermon that took three hours to deliver, yet consisted only of seven phrases, Jesus mounted the pulpit of the cross. His cathedral was the Place of the Skull, Golgotha, a garbage dump outside the walls of Jerusalem. His congregation was not the crowds of disciples and supporters who had followed Him for the last three years, but was now a couple of friends, His Mother, some bored Roman soldiers, and a jeering, spitting crowd of religious zealots who hated and feared Him.

Yet, as the metal spikes pierced His flesh, as the woven cap of thorns was pressed down upon His brow, as the gashes of the whips bled and festered, as the insults were shouted up at Him, Jesus, the High Priest, wearing the vestment of a loincloth, refused to curse the enemies of faith in His sermon. Instead, He prayed. He prayed to ask God to forgive them:

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

This was the opening of the Pastor's sermon delivered to His flock of black sheep with hardened hearts and hateful, vicious designs.

That He should pray for forgiveness for them who had proven themselves time and time again to be unworthy of any kindness, let alone forgiveness, is proof of what a good and devoted Shepherd He was. But, it was His first word, the first word of His last sermon, that truly echoes in my mind and memory: "Father."

"Abba, Father" ... "Papa" - if that had been the only word He spoke on that Good Friday, it would have been enough to remember and contemplate till the end of time, it would have spoken volumes.

"For the Jews of Jesus' day, the distance between Creator and created was so immense that human beings would not dare tempt Him and incur His wrath by mentioning His name. Only special intercessors such as Moses and the prophets could address God and speak to the people on His behalf." The sacred name of God, YHWH, would only be uttered by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies of the Temple once a year on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, as he prayed and offered sacrifice in atonement for the sins of all the people.

What He had said before in His Sermon on the Plain, He says now as He hangs in Calvary's pulpit; "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be your name ...'." He tells us that God is not to be feared ... be not afraid ... that God is not distant or unapproachable ... that "Abba", "Father", "Papa" longs to take us in his arms, teach us, protect us, listen to us, love us, and, yes, even forgive us.

In these first words of His last and greatest sermon, Jesus, the beaten, bruised, deserted, reviled Man of Sorrows tells us our greatest power is not to be found in weapons or payback or cutting words or stoney silence. Our greatest power against evil and hurt is forgiveness, empathy, compassion, love. But, when I am hurt or angry; when someone has stabbed me in the back with the knife of betrayal, I CANNOT forgive on my own, love on my own. Left to my own devices, I would call down hellfire; I would seek the ruin of my enemy and badmouth them to any and all who would listen; I would plot sweet, cold revenge. But if I call myself Christian, I cannot do any of that. I must drag the cross of my hurt and anger to the arms of my Father, lift up my heartfelt prayer to "Abba" and open my broken heart to the grace of His love and mercy, else I drown in a flood of bitterness, for I am there at Calvary, I hear the words my Pastor speaks ...

"Lord, I can easily imagine myself in the place of your executioners.

What they did to you, I do to you time and time again through my ignorance and lack of awareness. Through my lack of faith, I have mocked and spat upon you. Through my spiritual and moral failures, I have scourged you and crowned you with thorns. Through my irres-

ponsibility and lack of love I have nailed you to the cross and pierced your side. Forgive me, Lord, for all the times I have hurt you. Help me to turn to you and seek forgiveness. Help me to accept your forgiveness, and help me also to forgive myself. Help me to forgive others, Lord, as you have forgiven them. Help me to make your words of forgiveness my own.

Amen."