

Luke 23:32-43 ³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ 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. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And the soldiers cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ The people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him: "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:32-43

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"Last Words – A Good Friday Reflection"

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On July 30, 2020, several newspapers across the nation printed the final words of Congressman John Lewis just hours before his funeral. The Congressman had planned what his last words to the world would be. Around the same time, another book in a seemingly endless line of tell-alls came out revealing the last words of Princess Diana in the ambulance on the way to the Hospital in Paris, France – tragic words of confusion and pain – words that could not possibly have been planned or prepared. A casual search on the internet will reveal the last words of all kinds of famous people, from actors to authors to diplomats and world leaders. Some are tragic. Some are funny. And some are deeply meaningful. The last words my father said to me as he hung up the phone the night before he died were "I love you." As last words go, those are good ones.

Scripture records last words as well. Moses' last words and blessings are recorded in Deuteronomy 33. King David's final words to the nation of Israel are recorded in II Samuel 23, and as David lay on his deathbed, his last instructions to his son Solomon show up in I Kings 2. And II Kings 2 records the final words of the Prophet Elijah to Elisha before he's taken up to heaven in the whirlwind. So it is certainly no surprise the scripture also records the final words of Jesus before he gives his life for our redemption. All in all, scripture catalogues seven final utterances from Christ on the cross. They're printed at the back of your bulletin today if you want to look them up and read them in context. Our lesson today contains the first two of those utterances.

If there is anything in scripture that has the power to reduce me to tears, it is the expression of empathy Jesus speaks as he hangs there alone and in agony. Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. Even as Jesus' body is shutting down – his tongue swelling, his lungs collapsing – he somehow retained control of his emotional and mental state. Even in his pain, looking out at the crowd who mocks him, he seems to get them. Remember that the Jewish people were oppressed under one of the cruelest and most violent conquerors that world history has known: the Roman Empire. You and I (who have been born and bred in the land of the free and the home of the brave) have little or no concept of how such oppression fed fear and selfish survival instincts. We don't know what it's like to live in a place where people may be arrested, tortured, and killed without trial merely for speaking their mind. We don't know what it's like to live without law—where there was no recourse to extortion or injustice. We don't really understand the fear or the animosity it bred. But Jesus did.

We wonder how a crowd could clamor for his crucifixion. How could they not see the charges were trumped up because he threatened a few who were powerful? We don't understand their fear or their rage. But Jesus did. Jesus did. And he knew they didn't understand the sacrifice he was making...at least, not yet.

We today have 20 centuries of thought and understanding in our favor. We begin to see the meaning and import of his sacrifice. But we hardly have all the answers. Still today, Jesus gets us. He understands the motives, fears, and passions that drive us.

Forgiveness is built upon empathy. It is the ability to try and understand another. 'How could they do that to me?' we wonder. How indeed? It is in answering that question that forgiveness is born.

And still today, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" – forever holding out hope that we, too, will take his outstretched hand of forgiveness, and embrace his example of empathy for all of humankind. That we, too, will at least have the courage to acknowledge that we don't know all the circumstances or histories that drive another's animosity. And so, when we're hurting, when we're being attacked or insulted or belittled, we can strike back, or we can follow Jesus' example. We can pray for the mind of Christ – a mind that stayed engaged despite the suffering. A mind open to the awareness of another's pain and fear. Father, forgive them, he said.

And then he modeled it for us. Crucified there beside him are two in need of forgiveness. One is truly desperate. He just wants Jesus to get them out of this. "Free yourself and us," he pleads. I confess that I feel for him. He may be guilty of some horrendous crime, or he may simply be a political prisoner – one who has angered the powers-that-be by protesting or advocating for rebellion. Whatever his crime, I can imagine the pain and terror he might be feeling.

But that other criminal is more introspective, seemingly more in tune with what is happening to Jesus. To the other criminal, he says, "You and I are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong." And then he turns to Christ with an extraordinary request: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

Jesus' response is to offer the only explicit promise of salvation he gives in the scriptures: Today, you will be with me in paradise. James and John are promised martyrdom; their salvation is only implied (Mk 10.35-40). A rare person is told, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mk 12.34). But the only person to whom Jesus gives a point-blank promise is a self-confessed, convicted criminal, who is hanging beside him on a cross.

Jesus was not one to hold our Sin against us indefinitely. Indeed, he gave his life to free us from the power of Sin. What Jesus longed for, more than anything, was a transformed heart and life—one that grows towards God. Hanging beside him is a man who knows his guilt. At some point along the way, he's taken an honest look at himself and doesn't like what he discovers. "Remember me" is a plea to know that he matters, that all is not lost, that his life can amount to more than what it has been, even at the bitter end, even despite sin and brokenness. It's a disguised cry for meaning and purpose. And Jesus responds with an answer that promises the newness for which this man is longing.

The promise is still good for you and me, as well. Jesus did not come to save the perfect, but to heal the broken, and to perfect the willing. While he does not condone our sin, he will not hold our past against us. He will give us a future. So we, too, must be those who see hope and possibilities for those who are broken or lost. Jesus does not ask us to condone evil and violence, but he does ask us to see beyond it.

Today is not a day I can wrap up in a neat little bow and present to you with clarity. It's too big for that. Death is overwhelming. Life is even more so. But while I can't give you all the answers, I can remind you of what John tells about Jesus at the beginning of his gospel. He says that Jesus is the Word – the Word of God made flesh. The Word of God is not a book, according to scripture itself. The Word of God is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the first word of creation. But he is also the last word on creation – the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end. Today we hear Christ's last words from the Cross. But we also hear the last word on sin and death. They are overcome. Thanks be to God. Amen.