

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

March 29, 2024 – GOOD FRIDAY, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Father, Forgive Them*”

Isaiah 52:13—53:12	(Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant)
Psalms 22	(A prayer of lament foreshadowing Christ’s crucifixion)
Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9	(God testifies that He will make a new Covenant with us through the Blood of Christ)
St. John 18:1—19:42	(The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to St. John)

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The crucifixion procession arrived at Calvary’s hill a little before nine o’clock that Friday morning. The two thieves were fastened to their crosses and raised into place. Next the Roman soldiers fastened Jesus to His cross by driving sharp iron spikes through His wrists and ankles. Then they raised the cross with Jesus on it to an upright position. There Jesus hung on the center cross between two criminals. Beneath His cross crowds gathered to shout out their hatred of Him. He who never did harm to any of them but only showed them love, peace, and kindness.

When we more closely examine the cross and the crucifixion of Christ, we find that His death was just as much a miracle as His birth or resurrection. It could be said of His death that it was *natural*, *unnatural*, and *supernatural*.

It was natural because He *truly* died. It was natural in that all human beings die.

It was unnatural in that *Jesus* should not have died. Scripture tells us the wages of sin are death. Christ had no sin, yet He was put to death. It was unnatural that He who was perfectly holy should die.

It was also supernatural in that Jesus willingly laid down His life. Despite the roles the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans played in putting Jesus to death, no one actually took His life from Him. He gave it up in obedience to the Father’s will as an atonement for the sins of humankind.

While dying on the cross, Jesus made seven utterances or statements that are covered in all four Gospels. But this evening, I’d like us to focus on just one of those statements: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

First, this cry fulfilled the prophecy found in Isaiah 53:12, written 745 years before the event: “he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Second, this cry identified Jesus with His People: While on earth, Jesus never called on His Father to forgive sins. He demonstrated that He Himself had the power to forgive sins. In Luke 7:48, we read of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet and dried them with her hair: “Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’” Only God can forgive sins and the Jewish leaders knew that. In Mark 2:7 His opponents cry out, “Why does this man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Third, this cry shows the ignorance of the human heart. Jesus was the people’s long-awaited Messiah. He was their only means of salvation. Only through Him would and could the promises of God be fulfilled. But they knew not what they were doing. St. Peter writes in Acts 3:15: “[They] killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.”

Fourth, this cry shows Jesus knows our greatest need. Notice, He did not pray for His people’s health or wealth. He did not pray for their deliverance from the Roman Occupation or prosperity for the nation. Jesus prayed for their *forgiveness*. In His parable of the prodigal son, the prodigal knew he had sinned against his father and that his greatest need was confession, repentance, and forgiveness. Jesus knows this is also *our* greatest need.

Fifth, this cry shows Christ's great love for sinners. How would *we* act in the midst of the worst treatment we had ever received? Would we pray for them to be forgiven, or would we curse them to hell and ask God to destroy them? This brings us to the sober reality of Christ's deity. Only *God* can love like this. In John 15:13, Jesus says: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

Samson in his dying hour destroyed his enemies. Christ in His dying hour prayed for his. St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith, followed Christ's example—albeit in a slightly different order. While his enemies were stoning him to death, "Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60). With Jesus, the order was reversed: First, he prayed first for His enemies, then He asked God to receive His spirit.

Our Lord hangs painfully upon the cross. Silent. But then His dry, cracked lips are seen to move. Is He crying out in agony? No. Is He begging for pity? No. Is He pronouncing curses upon those who crucified Him? No. What then? He is praying—*for His enemies!* "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

But who is the "them" for whom Jesus asks forgiveness? He is praying for Judas who betrayed Him. He is praying for the Jewish leaders who had lied about Him, falsely arrested Him, beat Him, and spit upon Him. Jesus is praying for the crowd who eagerly yelled, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Jesus is praying for Pilate who found Him innocent yet still gave Him up to be crucified. Jesus is praying for the soldiers who whipped Him, mocked Him, spit on Him, and nailed Him to the cross. Jesus is praying for all of these: "Father, forgive them." Jesus is also praying for you, and me, and every other sinner because He hangs upon that Cross as our representative. He is there as one *of* us and one *with* us. He is there because of *our* sins.

Our Lord hangs upon the cross. No longer can His healing hands minister to the sick, for they are nailed to the tree. No longer can His feet carry Him on errands of mercy, for they are fastened to the wood. No longer can He instruct His disciples, for they have forsaken Him and fled. But one thing He can still do, and does—He prays!

Perhaps there are some here tonight who think you have nothing much to offer and possibly have little or no purpose in living. First, Jesus will forgive you for that despair. But second, you can beautifully imitate Christ and devote yourself to *prayer*—for your family, friends, neighbors, enemies, the community, our country, the Congress, the world, the Creation itself . . . the need for intercession by faithful people is both urgent and *endless!*

Our Lord hangs upon the cross. He prays for His murderers. In doing this, He shows us, He teaches us, that *no one* and *nothing* is ever beyond the reach of prayer. He shows us, He teaches us, to never give up, to never abandon hope, to *keep on praying*. Does it seem a waste of time to continue praying for that man, that woman, that wayward child, grandchild, or relative?

Does it ever seem to you as if someone is beyond the reach of God's mercy? Does their case seem to become more and more hopeless with each passing day? In such times of discouragement, think of Jesus on the cross. Remember that Christ prayed for His enemies, for those who made Him suffer the pain and torment of an unfathomably agonizing death.

And have you ever noticed, that if you are able to bring yourself to pray for someone who has hurt or offended you, it becomes harder to hate or be so angry with that person? Prayer for other people is an act of *love*, and God who IS love, when dying upon the Cross in the Person of His Son, loved the whole world both by giving Jesus' life for our sins, and by praying for it.\*

Thanks be to God! *Amen.*

\* Adapt. Timothy Proctor, "Father Forgive Them, For They Know Not What They Do," 24 November 2002, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/father-forgive-them-for-they-know-not-what-they-do-timothy-proctor-sr-d-min-sermon-on-easter-maundy-thursday-52663) < <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/father-forgive-them-for-they-know-not-what-they-do-timothy-proctor-sr-d-min-sermon-on-easter-maundy-thursday-52663>> 12 March 2024. Used with permission.