

## FATHER FORGIVE THEM

Luke 23:34

By Rev. Leo Douma

3<sup>rd</sup> February 2008

I have to confess to you my addiction- books. It's not unusual for me to have an outstanding account with Koorong bookstore. Let's say I owe \$50 and Johan Grobler, being a generous man, decides to pay it for me. I would be grateful but I would think I could have done it myself. However, imagine I've gone berserk and I owe \$2000 on books. Johan again decides to pay the account for me. How grateful would I be then? Our gratitude is in proportion to the extent of the debt paid. Easter is very early this year (23<sup>rd</sup> March), where we think of the debt Christ paid on the cross for our sin. But for us to truly appreciate what Jesus did, we need to recognize the extent of our debt. That is what Lent is about. Lent (which starts with Ash Wednesday next week) is the six weeks prior to Easter where we think of what Jesus actually went through in His suffering. It's the time we reflect on why Jesus suffered so much and our cause in that. Lent is a time for repentance and fasting, a time to change and do without those things that lead us away from God. To help us focus on Jesus' suffering in this time of Lent we will do a preaching series on what's been termed as "The Seven Sayings of Christ on the Cross". I think we would all agree that if we were condemned to die we would all prefer an execution that was quick. The ugly thing about crucifixion is it took the victim a long time to die. The suffering was immense as the person hung there hour after hour. The victim gradually dehydrated and become exhausted, unable to lift his body to breathe. So he slowly suffocated to death. As the commentators point out it was one of the worst forms of execution, reserved for the worst of criminals. But the one "plus", if we can put it that way, was that being a long drawn out process it allowed the victim time to speak; although, admittedly, it was very difficult. When we read through the four gospels we see that Jesus spoke seven times as he hung on the cross. Over the Lent period we will study these sayings, because they tell us a lot about what Jesus went through. They speak of Jesus' immense love and his determination to save His people.

This comes out so clearly in Jesus first words here in our text in Luke 23:34: “Father, *forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing*”. We notice what we have here is a prayer, a pleading with God the Father. While the soldiers rough Him up and hammer nails through his hands and feet into the cross timber, as the soldiers swear like the troopers they are and the crowd jeers and mocks- Jesus prays. The pain and the horror of the situation would put most people into a silenced terror. Or cause them to scream out and curse the executioners - “My blood will be on your hands! I will be avenged”. But not Jesus; He prays: “*Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.*” Notice the first part of that prayer. Jesus pleads that His Father in heaven “...*forgive them...*” Some might have thought he should have prayed “Father destroy them!” That is more likely to be the normal human reaction. If we are innocent and are being unjustly brutalized we would call out for justice, for vengeance. That is a very strong story line in many books and movies. But we also see it in the Bible. Think of the Psalms that cry out for God to destroy their enemies. And in Revelation we read of the martyrs who pray “Lord how long before you avenge our blood?” In a sense Jesus should have prayed “Father destroy them”. If he had it would have been just. For here we have the ultimate in human rebellion. Here we have the Light of the world, the Lord of life, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, God the Creator being persecuted and executed. A totally innocent man, a completely sinless man, is being put to death- and that in one of the cruellest ways as if He was the scum of the earth. You can well understand that all of heaven would have been in a rage! To feel the sense of anger of heaven, imagine the rage and righteous anger you would feel if you had to watch your child molested, beaten and murdered. It’s a scene we would not want to imagine because it is so horrible. I can feel my chest tighten and rage forming just at the thought of such being done to one of my children or grand children. How would all the forces of heaven have felt seeing what was being done to the Son of God? There would have been absolute rage- all of heaven would have been ready to destroy the human race from off the face of the earth! Please understand that God and heaven were not sitting dispassionately in heaven watching it all: “Oh look its Good Friday, it’s that time we set in eternity for Jesus to pay for human sin”. Even though God willed for his Son to suffer, even though God “gave His only Son”, it doesn’t mean that God doesn’t have a holy anger

towards human rebellion. The forces of heaven would have reacted instantly on Christ's command to destroy the evil. But Jesus prays: "*Father, forgive them...*"

It is a striking prayer. But at first glance it seems out of place. When Jesus was walking beside Simon carrying his cross along the road there were women who mourned and wailed for him. And Jesus had said "*Don't wail for me! Cry for yourselves! The time will come when you wished you were barren, that you were buried under the mountains*". And in the parable of the talents, aimed at the Pharisees, Jesus makes it clear that the master will kill the tenants who killed his son. Jesus also foretold of the terrible retribution on Jerusalem. In fact the city was totally destroyed in 70AD. So why does Jesus now pray for their forgiveness? It is not easy to say. Bible commentators differ in their opinion on what Jesus meant by that prayer. For example what does Jesus mean by "*forgive*" and who is "*them*"? The soldiers? The Pharisees? All the people? Some commentators say it is difficult to see how all those who were present could be forgiven because forgiveness first demands repentance. God's grace is not to forgive en mass. Forgiveness is particular, it requires individual response. Each person must come in repentance. So some suggest Jesus is praying for the 'elect', for those individuals who eventually will repent. But that misses the point of what is happening here. The best way to understand this passage is to see '*them*' as referring to all who are involved here in putting Jesus to death- the Pharisees, Pilate, the soldiers, the mob, the human race in its sin. The word used here in the Greek for "*forgiveness*" is not the usual word we translate as forgiveness. This Greek word can also mean "to leave it, to let it go, to tolerate for a while". It implies a temporary suspension of a charge or sentence. So Jesus is not praying for the justification of all who are present; that they are forgiven and seen as perfect in Christ, as we often use the word. But he is praying that God withhold judgment from them; that God does not obliterate the earth. While heaven was in a rage, ready to punish the people for the disgrace against the Son, Jesus prays "*...forgiven them...*" That is, 'not today father...let it go...do not pour out your anger on them.' Like the gardener in the Jesus' parable, Jesus calls for a delay in the judgment of fire. Christ is isolating himself from the people and taking the punishment they deserve on Himself. At the Fall of Adam the wrath of God was held

back. Now again it is held back. On this day, the day of Christ's crucifixion, Jesus is the one who will suffer and die. He is saying "Father, focus heavens rage on me. Today I will bear it." It is something he wants to do. It is something He has to do so that all of us, who deserve God's anger can have hope, can have a way of getting right with God. Yes, even those murdering him. Salvation can be theirs too if they repent. The time will come when "Yom Yahweh", the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment will arrive. Then all the evil and atrocities, all the sin done by men and women will be accounted for. Then the anger of God will come. But on that day Jesus will be the Judge, not the victim about to be murdered. Then he will stand there in glory as God, as the Judge, as the Lord, the all conquering Saviour. But not on this day at the cross. On this day its: "Father forgive them...suspend judgment for a time. I must carry it for now. Pour out your anger on me. Leave room for the future; leave time for the gospel to go out. People need to know and understand what happened here, so they may repent and receive salvation."

You notice in the second part of the prayer how Jesus pleads for his persecutors because "...*they don't know what they are doing.*" The Pharisees would have said they were doing God a favour; getting rid of a blasphemer. The soldiers were just obeying orders. The crowd was ignorant of the facts. They did not realize the full spiritual implications of what was happening here. It just seemed to them like another of many crucifixions. For a lot of people in those days executions were entertainment in their dreary lives. However, this failure to know did not take away their guilt. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Jesus did not ask for pardon on the basis of their not knowing; but on the basis of his suffering on the cross. But the time would come when they would know. The significance of the events of Calvary had to be made clear to them so they could see God's way of salvation, so they could believe and repent. That is the process we are involved in now- making sure that people know what happened at Christ's crucifixion. We all have to get it into our heads that we are living on borrowed time. We are in the "Yom Yahweh"- the Day of the Lord. Since the Fall into sin and especially since the crucifixion, the world exists on the grace of God. There is a new day each morning only because God is merciful and gracious, because God is faithful to his promises in Christ. But each new day brings us closer

to the time when God fulfils His Word: *"It is mine to avenge. I will repay says the Lord."* Each new day this prayer of Jesus gets weaker, because by the preaching of the Word throughout the world, by the church's witness, the message is being told. Joshua prayed that the day would not end as the sun stood still over Gibeon. Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing- don't let the day of the Lord end yet, Father. Let the gospel go out."

During this time of Lent let's give serious thought to this prayer of Jesus. Lent is about repentance and fasting. It's about changing and giving up doing things that are not right. Let's get perspective, let's get real and recognize we are living on borrowed time. Let's consider what our priorities should be, what we should really be doing in our homes, with our work, with our church life. Please think about it. What are you, what are we, focused on? Are there things we need to repent of? Are there priorities we need to change? Next week we have the opportunity to participate in the Lord's Supper. That sacrament reminds us of God's grace. It reminds us that if we come in faith and repentance to Jesus we are completely forgiven. And by that we do not mean God holding back for a while. No, in Jesus we are completely forgiven, forever. But as those who have experienced this, who have tasted that the Lord is good, we cannot sit on our laurels. We have a gospel to proclaim. Because one day Jesus will say "Father, today!- today, the whole creation will see that I am Lord.". But at the moment God still hears his Son's prayer: "Let it go, Father, let it go. They don't all know yet."