

## Luke 23:33-38 – Ash Wednesday – Father, Forgive Them – February 18, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

Today is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the Lenten season. And this day requires us to know our limits. We live under the curse as we await God's final salvation. It is as we hear in Genesis 3, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

And because of the curse, the Christian life is a struggle. But it is a worthwhile struggle. And it comes with some healthy traditions. For us, the Alleluias are set aside until Easter. We don't sing the Gloria in Excelsis in Lent. We focus on the cross.

Now, we don't pretend that the resurrection didn't happen. In fact, you will hear about the resurrection in some of our Lenten hymns. But we take our sin seriously—and our need for repentance. We fast—as we discussed on Sunday. We pray. We give. We prepare our hearts. We amend our lives. We humble ourselves and wait for the Lord to lift us up.

On these Wednesdays of Lent, we are going to take a careful look at the Words of Jesus from the cross. There are seven statements that Jesus makes here. And so, this sermon series will take us right up to Maundy Thursday. Obviously, we will spend some time with the cross on Good Friday as well.

Our opening hymn will guide the way, *Jesus in Your Dying Woes*. If you look at this hymn in the hymnal, you will see that it has 21 verses. It is probably for the best that we didn't sing them all today. In reality, this is a Good Friday hymn for a service in which all seven words are heard. But instead, we will sing the three verses that correspond to the words for the week. We don't know this hymn very well. But by the end of Lent, it will be very familiar.

Now, my purpose is not to turn all of Lent into Good Friday. But sometimes I think I don't talk about the cross enough. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Every sermon doesn't have to explicitly mention the cross. But the cross is what makes sense of the whole Gospel.

Along the way, we are also going to read the Epistles of Jesus from Revelation. There are also seven of them. Seven is an important number in Scripture. In Revelation we find Jesus—through St. John the Theologian—sending letters to churches in Asia Minor. And they have much to say to these ancient churches—as well as to the Church today.

Now, we can't know with precise certainty the order of the given statements of Jesus from the cross. We will be looking at the accounts in Matthew, Luke, and John in this series. And harmonizing them is difficult. Not that they conflict. But the order is not easily discernable. And retelling everything in perfect chronological sequence is not the Evangelists highest priority.

Even so, I believe that Jesus' comments in our Gospel reading today are the right place to start. This is the first word—in many ways. As Jesus suffers, He begins with these cross-shaped words, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." And when we

comprehend these words, life can never return to normal. And this gives us some sense of what the Gospel is all about.

Jesus is at Golgotha—in Aramaic. Calvary—from Latin. The place of the Skull—in Greek. You can imagine why this place has its name. And Jesus hangs there with the worst kinds of criminals. But that's not the case with Jesus. He is the Innocent One. On human level, this is a travesty of justice.

But here, we are not on a human level. There is mystery surrounding everything that happens here. And we want to be cautious about explaining the experiences of Christ on a human psychological level. We see betrayal, rejection, treachery, even abandonment. But Jesus doesn't need us to sympathize. We can't approach the cross with mere sentimentality.

But in our reading, we do get to listen in on an interior conversation between God the Son and God the Father. The Gospel writers regularly give us a sense of how Jesus prayed. But before we say what this moment means for us, it is important to know what is going on in the mind of Christ. And His purpose at the cross is the forgiveness of our sins.

The whole of Jesus' life is for us and for our redemption. The incarnation, temptation, transfiguration, teachings, miracles—all of it. His sinless life is necessary. But it all leads to crucifixion. The cross becomes the crux of our salvation.

And the cross of Christ saves us in three essential ways. And this will be foundational for us going forward. On the cross Jesus conquered the curse of death. On the cross Jesus triumphed over evil—and the Evil One. And on the cross, Jesus made atonement for human sin with His innocent suffering and death.

And we can see that Jesus' petition here is connected with this third idea. "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Salvation must include the forgiveness of sins. Without the cross we would be judged for every thought, word, and deed. For all we have done—and for all we have left undone. And it is good for us to slow down in Lent—to think about what He says—about when He says it—and what this means for us.

Here, Jesus fulfills His own teachings. We have given some time to *The Sermon on the Mount* over the last few weeks. Here, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

In Luke 6, in *The Sermon on the Plain*, Jesus continues, "I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Of course, He intends this for us too. We are to love our enemies. But it sure makes it a lot more possible for us—when we see His love for us at the cross—in this particular moment.

Paul makes much of this in Romans 5. He says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Now, we tend to think of sin lightly. We have a hard time seeing when we are in opposition to the purposes of God. We might not think we need forgiveness—especially when we don't know what we're doing. We assume modern accounts of responsibility. We

justify our actions. We blame others for our sin. We make excuses. Sometimes even when we seek forgiveness—we do so for affirmation rather than atonement. Our desire for forgiveness doesn't match our actual need.

How extraordinary it is that *our lives* have been redeemed. Christ died for sinners like us. Christ literally makes life possible through His life, death, and resurrection. The redeeming act consists in a wholly unique bearing of the total sin of the world—by the Father's wholly unique Son—who alone is capable of such an office.

But here—not only does He have us in mind—He prays for Judas, and Herod, and Pilate, the Roman soldiers, and the Pharisees—all those involved in His death that day. And this fact is amazing. Most of them—if not all of them—will never benefit from His grace. But it is still there. His words are surprisingly kind. They know not what they do. And truly, this is a mystery to them.

Jesus seems like just another upstart insurrectionist—just another religious zealot. They don't see that Jesus is God Almighty. They don't believe they are killing the Author of Life. They don't see the salvation of the world. Their intention is evil and selfish. They are thinking only about themselves—and their own power and status and beliefs and rights.

They don't know what they are doing. Jesus speaks to their ignorance. It is easy in this life—to be out of our depth. Sometimes we don't even know what we don't know—if you know what I mean. We think we understand—but we just don't.

This is why it is so important to listen to Jesus—slowly, deliberately, humbly. And His words on the cross are a perfect example. We will see—over the course of this sermon series—that some of the actors at the cross will find this to be a moment of faith. And it is a strange place for faith—as Jesus is being executed.

But I hope it works out that way for us too. I hope the value of the cross—and the forgiveness of sins that Jesus works there for you—captures your attention—your appreciation—your gratitude. The cross can be for us something like what Jesus says to the ancient church of Ephesus, “You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.”

Maybe there was a time when we really appreciated the love of Christ manifested as Jesus is lifted up for the sins of the world. But now, it is *passé*. We have heard it too many times. And our sins are not that bad—or so we think.

Let me recall you to the love you had for Christ—and the things of Christ—at first. Embrace the mystery of the cross like when you first grasped what the cross was all about. Test your deepest theological convictions. Or maybe even embrace some deep theological convictions for the first time.

The more we know about Christ and the cross—the more we are forced to rethink everything we think we know. In the end, these words are for us, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they are *exactly* what we need.

Next week, we turn to the second word. We stay in Luke 23. We hear the conversation of the two thieves. Each one responds to the crucifixion of Jesus very differently. But it is Jesus' words that are most striking. He says to one of the thieves, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+