

May I invite you to come to the Cross this morning and fix your eyes upon Jesus. The Apostle Paul tells us in the book of Ephesians that God's salvation plan was determined even before the creation of our world – and that the culmination of that plan, would come at great cost.

Today as we gather on Good Friday, we take this time to reflect on the loving sacrifice of Jesus to secure our salvation; and on the love of God to open up the way for us, so that we could be in His glorious presence forever.

Opening Prayer:

Our loving Father God, Today we pause to remember your sacrificial love: Your love that shone light into our darkness: That brought life into such emptiness; That brought hope into our devastation; That spoke truth; That released freedom; And brought us forgiveness instead of punishment.

Thank you that we can now walk in the light of your life, hope, truth, freedom and forgiveness, this day and every day. Be with us as we remember your sacrifice and lead us close to yourself today, Amen.

I'd like to read from the Gospel of Luke this morning. Chapter 23...

26 As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Can we think for a moment this morning upon Jesus words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Jesus has been nailed to the Cross; they have spat in his face; they have flogged him to within an inch of his life; they have mocked him; jammed a crown of thorns into his skull; they have intentionally set about executing Him. And now while he hangs between life and death, he says... "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Didn't they know what they were doing? How could they not know?? Whether it be the Roman soldiers, or the Scribes and Pharisees, they knew what they were doing. They knew exactly what they were doing, but ...they didn't know who they were doing it to. Out of jealousy; out of self righteousness; out of self centred ambition; out of self preservation, the Scribes and Pharisees had Jesus nailed to a cross.

Tricia Rhodes describes the scene... "The hustle and bustle of life goes on below the crucifixion mount. Those who've come to watch the crucifixion form an eclectic group – religious leaders with righteous resolve, soldiers there to do a job; travellers by would stop now and then to stare, before hurrying on to their business in the city.

And there's another group separate from the rest. One man and a handful of women huddle together a short way from the centre cross in stoic silence, grief covering their tear streaked faces.

Time passes, and then... those near the cross are startled by the voice of the one in the centre. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

In other words, "Father, although I am without sin and therefore death is not required for me, forgive them; don't come upon them in your wrath; don't give them what they deserve, but be merciful to them; forgive them, Father."

You know, Jesus words were not just for those around that cross on that day, but for all of humanity. **"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."** Praise God that He has forgiven us; he has not given us what we deserve! This is why this is Good Friday!

But, as Christians, we are also meant to be like Christ and forgive those who wrong us. Can we forgive when we are hurt, humiliated, wronged, scarred with the unkindness of another, be it a member of the family, or a total stranger. Can we forgive?

Have you ever wondered about Jesus words, "Take up your cross and follow Me." (Matt 16:24) It means to put to death that which is tempting us into sin; to die to selfishness and self-centredness. But have you considered that it may also mean to forgive others in the way that Christ has forgiven us? Can we die to our desire to seek revenge, and our demand that justice be served upon those who hurt us? Can we take up our cross and forgive them?

You see, for some of us, we consider ourselves the victim. We see that others have in a sense, nailed us to a cross. But of course, it's a cross of our own choosing. Through every wrong and hurt they have caused to us; through their self-centredness and selfishness that we have not forgiven, that holds us to our own cross. And we're stuck there in our own anger and resentment, until we forgive. Have we nailed ourselves to a cross? Can we forgive?

You see forgiveness can be a two way street. As we forgive the sins of another, we find freedom and peace. But as we express our forgiveness of another, that may also find release them from guilt and shame. Have you considered that your failure to forgive someone else, may contribute to their guilt, shame, loneliness, sorrow, or sense of worthlessness? If they know they've wronged you but don't know your forgiveness, are you holding them to their cross?

You see, as the victim we can be nailed to a cross by the nails of others self-centeredness, but we can also use those same nails of self-centredness to hold someone else captive? If something is true of us, then it is also true of them.

And so, for our own well being and the wellbeing of others, can we forgive?

The following true story illustrates beautifully the forgiveness which can be experienced as someone is doing the pounding of nails into our lives.

A.J. Cronin, was a doctor and recalled this event. An American family by the name of Adams, had 2 teen-age daughters and a 6 year old son, Sammy. When WWII commenced, the family decided to take in an orphan boy from Italy named Paul Piotrostanalsi. They did everything possible to comfort this pale, spindly-legged, frightened refugee, but the boy responded quite negatively and showed no sign of gratitude to the family except, to Sammy. He adored Sammy, the two were always together.

Against all advice, Paul went swimming in a river which was contaminated and came down with a septic infection that nearly killed him. The doctor wanted Paul isolated from the rest of the family, so they made a bedroom for him in the attic. Paul was far too contagious to see any one, except the doctor and a nurse who wore full protective clothing.

One morning Mr Adams found that the nurse had fallen asleep outside the attic door. He opened it and then found Paul that was not there. He ran to Sammy's room and there was Paul sleeping next to Sammy. Sammy was much younger than Paul and had not been the strongest little boy. Though everything was done for him, poor Sammy never had a chance; and he died.

A year later Dr.Cronin visited the family and was amazed to see Mr. Adams working in the garden with a young lad. It was none other than the little refugee!! Overcome by a sense of bitter injustice, Cronin exclaimed, "All I can say...he's lucky, this Paul Pietro...whatever his wretched name is!!"

Mr. Adams put his arm around the boy's shoulder and said with a quiet half-ashamed smile, "You'll have no more trouble with his last name. He's Paul Adams now. We've adopted him."

Although our sin; our septic infection, is responsible for the death of Jesus, God has adopted us into His family. And God loves us; and puts His arm around our shoulder and he says, "Learn from me; stay under my wing. Let me be your refuge, peace and strength."

Scripture tells us that Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Some versions say He "was determined to go." Without a doubt, Jesus had made up His mind and no one would convince Him otherwise. He resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem knowing that His triumphal entry would mark the beginning of the end of His time on earth. He knew He'd die there, and yet He went.

Now consider..., the night of the Passover, Jesus was in the Garden and he asked His Father three times, "Is there any other way?" Was His resolve faltering? Three times, "Is there any other way?" Finally in prayer, he again comes to the place of resolution that He was prepared to go through with it, as this was truly the will of His father. The storm he faced would not be removed, and so He continued to place His trust and His life in His Father's hands.

As we face storms like we're facing at the moment – COVID-19, we too may ask **our Father** to save us from it. And He may! But can we also be like Jesus and trust our **Heavenly Father** who has adopted us, that His will is perfect and trust our lives into His hands?

There are some folk today who wonder why Almighty God doesn't step in and stop this virus; why God doesn't eradicate it; why evil is not put to an end? But, stop to think of the implications. If God were to remove all that is so harmful to mankind; if God were to remove all that was evil? What would He do? Wipe out all evil men? And if so, where does He stop? If God destroys all who resist His will, or all that was sinful, how would you and I come out?

And so, Almighty God has another way, and that way is the way of the loving Father. He meets us where we are, in our world, and puts His arm around our shoulder. He loves us, and love means doing all that you can for the other's well-being.

We are all sinners in need of a Saviour. "For the wages of sin is death." When we sin, what we get in return, is death. The price that we pay for sin, is death. Yet, Jesus was without sin, and so in His death, he has paid the price for our sin. And because he has paid the price for our sin, we then are assured of eternal life. That's why I hope to be holding the hand of the Man, on that day when I die.

He loves us. In doing all that He could for our well-being, He died for us. He resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem in order to die on Calvary – to complete the greatest act of love the world has experienced. He has not left us, nor forsaken us, but is with us. And He called us to remember Him, and to celebrate His love and goodness for us as we share in the Lord's Supper.

As we have come to the Cross this morning, we have fixed our eyes upon Jesus. Because it is you and I that belonged on that cross, not Jesus!!! It was not His cross that He died upon, it was not for His sins that He suffered as He hung between heaven and hell, it was your sins and my sins. It was not His punishment that He took from the Father, but our punishment. Jesus took your place and my place on the Cross.

I wonder, had Jesus placed Himself into the words of Psalm 116:13? **"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD."** Jesus would be lifted up on that cross for our salvation; he is our cup of salvation and as we drink this morning we celebrate that we are eternally forgiven and look forward to eternal life in the glory of his presence.

As we take of the emblems this morning, can we lift of the bread and the cup of salvation as we praise Him! Take a few moments now to thank God, and then take them emblems...

The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to live in a sin filled world, and he struggled. And there was a certain affliction that he asked God to remove from him; which wasn't. And later he wrote that God had said to him, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** (2 Cor 12:9) My Grace! God's Grace!

As Jesus hung on the Cross, God's grace was carrying Him through. Whatever you're going through, God's grace is sufficient for you.

"My grace." What does that mean? Peace for the anxious.....Forgiveness for the guilty....Love for the hated.....Hope for the hopeless....Sight for the blind....Faith for the doubting.....Healing for the injured.....Comfort for the afflicted...Joy for the sorrowful....Life for the dying....Rest for the weary.

I trust that for you, you not only hope to be holding the hand of the man on the day that you die, but are holding onto His hand today. I trust that you may know His arm around your shoulder.

Can we close this time in prayer...

Our loving Father, We thank you today for Jesus Christ, who finished the work that you were sent to do. He resolutely set about achieving our salvation.

Thank you that you have not left us, nor will you forsake us. Thank you that you will continue to see your plan fulfilled, and You will declare at some point over the history of the world, "It is finished!"

Meanwhile, in these days of tribulation, and as your church is attacked around the globe, would you strengthen your people, and shine the light of your gospel ever more brightly into our dark world. Would you enable us by your Holy Spirit to be faithful to our call. Grant us strength to bear our cross and endure our sufferings, even unto death. Enable us to live and love so faithfully that we also become good news to the world, so that you are glorified. Help us to forgive as you have forgiven us.

Thank you for the joy and the peace that we know as we follow You. We praise you and thank you for the Cross. Amen.