

The first of the Seven

At the Mass this past Friday, April 8th the Church prayed this beautiful prayer:

“O God, who in this season give the Church the grace to imitate devoutly the Blessed Virgin Mary in contemplating the Passion of Christ”

Notice this prayer mentions that we are given the grace to imitate Mary in contemplating the Passion of Christ. What does this mean? Grace is another word for gift. Therefore we have been given the gift of the story of the Gospel to enter into the contemplation of the Passion. While it is true we were not there for those eventful hours two thousand years ago, because we can hear each year of the Lord’s Passion we are invited to stand with Mary at the Cross and think deeply about what the Lord did there. This is why on this Sunday the Gospel takes 15 minutes to read.

What I want to do with you today, is focus on one aspect of the Passion Story in Luke’s Gospel. In total the Lord spoke Seven Words from the Cross. The first of these words is recorded by Luke alone:

“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”.

The power of this word is striking when we know the historian Seneca tells us that those who were crucified cursed the day of their birth, the executioners, their mothers, and even spat on those who looked upon them. Cicero, another ancient historian tells us that at times it was necessary to cut out the tongues of those who were crucified, to stop their terrible blasphemies. Hence the executioners expected a cry but not the kind of cry that they heard. The scribes and Pharisees expected a cry, too, and they were quite sure that He who had preached “Love your enemies,” and “Do good to those who hate you,” would now forget that Gospel with the piercing of feet and hands. They felt that the excruciating and agonizing pains would scatter to the winds any resolution He might have taken to keep up appearances. Everyone expected a cry, but no one – with the exception of those at the foot of the Cross – expected the cry they did hear. As Archbishop Fulton Sheen poetically wrote:

“Like some fragrant trees which bathe in perfume the very axe which gnashes them, the great Heart on the Tree of Love poured out from its depths something less a cry than a prayer, the soft, sweet, low prayer of pardon and forgiveness: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”¹

This is the reason why Jesus came for as St. Paul says: “This saying is worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15) But notice that Jesus does not say “Father I forgive, them” but rather “Father forgive them”. Why is this? We know from John’s Gospel that Jesus says repeatedly that he only does what he sees the Father doing. And while it is true that he is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, in the fullness of his humanity he is totally dependent of the grace emanating from the Father. You might remember that earlier

¹ Sheen, Fulton J.. The Seven Last Words . ST PAULS. Kindle Edition.

in the Passion when Jesus is praying at the Mount of Olives, he again speaks in the midst of his anguish to the Father:

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.²

What does Jesus' witness tell us about our relationship to the Father? So often when we are in deep trials and experiencing anguish of soul, we can conclude God's is distant and indifferent to our plight and suffering. But the exact opposite is the truth. If in our great need we call out to the Father, then we are welcoming the Father heart of God to enter into my anguish so as to share in it with me. We can also say that the mercy of heaven is infused within our hearts so that in the midst of the suffering which we cannot overcome on our own, the Father imparts the love that enables us to know consolation in the midst of our consternation.

I think it is worth pondering that the one who came to take away the sin of the world, shows us here that forgiveness can only be accomplished when the Son is joined to the heart of the Father, who is love. The same is true with us. On our own we cannot forgive, but as we bring to the Father the ways we have experienced betrayal, cruelty and ill treatment because of the attitude and actions of others, we can have imparted to us the same grace Jesus asked for when forgiving those who treated him with such violence, fraudulence, scorn and contempt.

Notice as well, that he gives to them the benefit of the doubt. What can Jesus mean when he says they do not know what they are doing? The actions of the religious authorities could not have been more organized and premeditated, the yielding of Pilate to the voice of the crowd did not in any way acquit him of his responsibility for willfully handing an innocent man over to death. But Jesus is able to recognize that these men are all caught in a way of seeing the world where they are prisoners of their own fears. The religious authorities are threatened by Jesus that he will undermine their status and standing within Israel. Pilate would much rather keep the peace than do the right thing and let Jesus because he is afraid of a rioting crowd.

Again listen to Archbishop Sheen's vivid prose:

Forgive whom? Forgive enemies? The soldier in the courtroom of Caiaphas who struck Him with a mailed fist; Pilate, the politician, who condemned a God to retain the friendship of Caesar; Herod, who robbed Wisdom in the garment of a fool; the soldiers who swung the King of Kings on a tree between heaven and earth – forgive them? Forgive them, why? Because they know what they do? No, because they know not what they do. If they knew what they were doing and still went on doing it; if they knew what a terrible crime they were committing by sentencing Life to death; if they knew what a perversion of justice it was to choose Barabbas to Christ; if they knew what cruelty it was to take the feet that trod everlasting hills and pinion them to the limb of a tree; if they knew what they were doing and still went on doing it, unmindful of the fact that the very blood which they shed was capable of redeeming them, they would never be saved! Why, they would be damned if it were not for the fact that they were ignorant of the terrible

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Lk 22:42). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

thing they did when they crucified Christ! It was only the ignorance of their great sin that brought them within the pale of the hearing of that cry from the Cross. It is not wisdom that saves; it is ignorance!³

St Paul in 1 Corinthians put it succinctly when he stated:

None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁴

When we are sinned against or when we sin against others we too are participating in this same kind of ignorance or suffering from its consequences. For at some level we lose sight of how that person is made in the precious image of God. But if we are will and open to ponder more fully the Passion of the One whose first word from the Cross is of forgiveness then with Mary we can devoutly contemplate His Passion. The prayer that I began to quote at the beginning of this homily can allow us to pray what then follows:

Grant we pray, through her intercession, that we may cling more fully each day to your Only Begotten Son and come at last to the fullness of his grace.

The more we are open to the grace of this story, the more Jesus will impart to us the fullness of his grace so that with him we can learn to pray:

Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

³ Sheen, Fulton J.. The Seven Last Words . ST PAULS. Kindle Edition.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (1 Co 2:8). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.