

First Word: Luke 23:33-34a

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left.

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

Throughout the Gospels, we hear Jesus speak many words of prayer. He speaks a prayer that is still our model. Jesus says prayers of thanks: that the Father had kept the glories of the kingdom hidden from those who thought themselves wise, while revealing them to little children; for bread and fish before feeding 5,000; for bread and wine before feeding his disciples with himself. He prays before raising his friend’s decomposing body, and before opening blind eyes and deaf ears. The night before he dies, he prays an extended prayer for his Church of the present and the future.

It’s only fitting that Jesus’ hours on the cross are also marked by prayers. The first is for the Father’s forgiveness for those who are killing him. Jesus is perfect to the end. He had commanded his disciples from the very beginning to pray for their enemies and those who persecute them, and that is exactly what he does here.

It’s a very short prayer, as the best prayers often are. It’s short on words, long on meaning. It has three parts: the address, the request, and the basis. Jesus addresses his Father because the Father set in motion the course of events that has led to him being on the cross. He knows his Father is watching and listening. The Father put Jesus here to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Jesus had become all sin on the cross, the embodiment of sin, and it was dying with him. The Father’s will is that forgiveness comes to the world through the death of his own Son, even upon those who kill the Author of Life, those who were disregarding every Old Testament prophecy. It is only through forgiveness that God’s enemies become his friends, that those in the darkness step into the light of Christ. This is true for those who mocked Jesus and nailed him to the cross, though we do not know how many believed it. It is also true for us, whose sin also placed him on that cross.

Jesus does not ask them if they want forgiveness, he only pleads for it. If Jesus asks first, the offer will never be taken. If he dies for it and pleads for it first, then it convinces. Jesus also shows compassion when he says they do not know what they are doing. Their ignorance does not make guiltless; if they were not guilty, they would not need forgiveness. But it is not too late for them, Jesus says. My forgiveness can still change them. It was forgiveness he prayed for them, and for us.

Those who have received his forgiveness by faith join in Jesus’ prayer: that all those who should know better, who could know better, would hear his cry of forgiveness for them and believe it. It is the prayer of our Savior and his Church for all sinners who hate him now and mock him now: for them to see his suffering for them, his cry of forgiveness for them, and become his forgiven friends.

Second Word: Luke 23: 39-43

One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus said to him, “Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”

If you’re wondering whether Jesus’ cry for his enemies, for those who hated him in ignorance, to believe in him and love him, could actually work...this thief is your answer: yes.

We don’t know what the criminals had done. But we have an idea, because the Roman government only crucified a certain kind of person: slaves who rose up or tried to escape; foreign soldiers who refused to surrender in war; murderers; and traitors. There were exceptions and variations, but by and large those were the categories of capital crimes.

We know only two things about these two criminals: by their own confession, they belonged to one of those categories. And we know what each thought about Jesus. The first one, doomed and bitter, thought Jesus deserved to be mocked. “Hey, pal, aren’t you some kind of savior or something? Why can’t you save me?” He looks at Jesus crucified and he hates what he sees: someone as powerless as he is. That’s what he sees when he looks at Jesus, so he uses the few breaths he has left to heap insults on a fellow condemned sufferer.

The second criminal, also powerless and condemned, also looks at Jesus. And he loves what he sees. And he trusts it. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He knew something about Jesus’ preaching, perhaps he had been among the thousands who went out to be baptized by John. He knew this much for sure: the one dying was crying out and up for forgiveness for his enemies as he died. And Jesus’ purpose for that cry worked on him! So he uses his last breaths to confess the Christian faith in his own words.

Do we want to be powerful with Jesus? That’s what the first criminal wanted. The second wanted to be powerless with Jesus. He wanted to die with Jesus. He trusted Jesus to be a King in weakness and death, the one King that really matters. Holy Baptism teaches us to see Jesus the same way. It is more than a sprinkling, it is a flood that drowns all our attempts to commend ourselves and save ourselves. It teaches us to find life and glory forever not in ourselves but in Christ crucified. It teaches us to find life in his weakness, suffering, and death, in our own weakness, suffering, and death.

As God said to St. Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness.” Only the eyes of faith, opened in baptism, look at the crucified Jesus and love his powerlessness, love his death. Only the eyes of faith look at a dying man and ask a King to remember. And to the one with that faith, Jesus says, “With no doubt I say to you: Whatever the crimes you confess, when weakness has ended and death is through, you are with me in glory.”

Third Word: John 19:25-27

Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene were standing near the cross.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother!" And from that time this disciple took her into his own home.

The Bible doesn't let us know about very many of the conversations Jesus had with his mother over the years. But it does tell us about the last one before his death. We do hear Mary say some things to Jesus: "Why have treated us this way? We have been searching for you carefully." And, "They have no more wine." Both times Jesus answered her just the right way, when both times she started the conversation.

This time Jesus starts it, and again says just the right thing. As Jesus suffocates, as his breaths get shorter and his blood flow slows, his love for his mother is long and fast as ever. Sorrowful but powerful, Jesus remains the perfect Son to the end. He was perfect to his executioners, perfect to the thief, and so perfectly loving of course to his mother and his friend John. As he hangs on the cross, we see not only his obedient death to wash our sins away, but his holy life that covers us.

But we should see this, too: when Jesus looks at Mary and John, he sees not just mother and friend. He sees his Holy Church. There are a few other believers standing bravely and faithfully by the cross. Mary and John are believers, too. They are Jesus' body, the bride he dies to make holy. And what does Jesus do for his Church, besides remove every spot and stain of sin to present them to himself holy and radiant? He gives the members of that Church to each other. He brings them together as one body, one family under him.

You ought to look around at your fellow believers and see them this way. Jesus has given you to them, and them to you. We are mothers and sons and sisters and brothers, brought together by the crucified Christ who unites us. Jesus died to give us to the Father. He also died to give us to each other.

How do you think Mary and John treated each other for the rest of their lives? That mother, that friend and brother, who looked up together at their crucified Savior on Good Friday? How will we treat other, who tonight, together, watch him die for our sins, who on Sunday will watch him, together, leave the grave? See the love he has for you. See the love he has for those around you tonight. Let it bring us together. Here are your sons and daughters. Here are your fathers and mothers. Here are your brothers and sisters.

Fourth Word: Matthew 27:45-46

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in with a loud voice, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabacthani?*” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

You and I don’t get to understand it. That’s the mistake people often make when they come to this word. Those shocking words come to us first from Psalm 22. And we want to know what they mean. Did God really abandon Jesus? Why, if Jesus is sinless? Could it just be a thought or a feeling? And either way, why quote a Psalm to express it? There are a lot of questions. People want to understand. But the point is that you and I don’t get to understand it, don’t have to understand it. Because it happened to Jesus and not to us.

He goes it alone: “My God,” not ours. “Forsaken me,” not us. We don’t get to be on the inside of what he experienced. It did not happen to you. Even the criminals at this point have no fellowship with Jesus, because God has more regard for them than for his Son. God is watching the sparrow and the lily and Pilate and the chief priests, but his eye is not on Jesus.

Jesus suffered when Judas betrayed him and Peter denied him. He suffered when the disciples squabbled about who was the greatest. He suffered when they punched and mocked him and drove the nails through his hands and feet. But this is the peak of his suffering: his loneliness, his utter forsakenness.

The cross was meant to be utterly lonely. If you died in a bed, you could be surrounded by people who could touch you and console you. Even if you died in the middle of the desert all alone, you could still feel some connection to nature. But on a cross, there was the deepest loneliness: people around you, but only to scorn you and shake their heads at you. Nature is only a curse, as all you feel of its pain possible. The criminals had that level of loneliness. But God was still with them. But not with his Son. On the cross, Jesus was even that kind of lonely: without the presence of his Father.

But because he did experience it and understand it, you never will. No matter how lonely you are, God is with you always. Even when you die, not matter who else is absent, no matter whether it’s in the desert or in your bed, he will be with you. And he will remain with you through eternity.

It is the most profound loneliness: to be without the presence of God. It is the loneliness we deserve to feel. But thanks to Jesus, we do not know it. We do not understand. And we never will, thanks to Jesus. Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, dearest Jesus unto thee.

Fifth Word: John 19:28

After this, knowing that everything had now been finished, and to fulfill the Scripture, Jesus said, “I thirst.”

The last time Jesus told someone he was thirsty was way back in chapter 4 of St. John’s Gospel. He told a woman who he was, by the standards of the culture, not supposed to be with, “Give me a drink.” She was a morally suspect woman, and Samaritan at that. She had been divorced five times and was now living with a sixth man, this time without the benefit of marriage. He risked being put to public shame by speaking to her at all.

But he wasn’t put to shame. Not yet. At that time, he was still the beloved miracle worker and the great hope to restore a powerful earthly Israelite nation. People back then pushed passed each other just to get a look at him, a touch of him.

Fast forward three years. The next time Jesus asks for a drink, he has become the pariah. He has become unpopular, unloved, and unwanted, the blasphemer crucified outside Jerusalem’s walls. He is again surrounded by suspect company – convicted company, to be more exact. “God from God, Light from Light, true God from True God.” This is what we call him in the Nicene Creed. But there we also call him true man, born of the virgin Mary. And here he proves it.

And what does it matter to us? You and I are human. We thirst because we have human limitations. But we have one limitation Jesus did not, the most important one of all. Like the Samaritan woman and the thieves – and the soldiers and the mockers and the religious leaders and even Mary and John – we have sin. In his holy human body Jesus gathered up all our sin. In his divine body our sin died.

Jesus became man to set us free from sin. When he dies, our sin dies. And he dies having suffered hell as a human. This Jesus is our sin’s death in our substitute. Jesus does not waste words ever. He cries out in thirst so that you will know: this is your human substitute.

And so, he has become for you the water of life. As he told the woman by the well, whoever drinks this water will never thirst, and will live forever. Drink deeply of him who died in your place. Take him into your heart by faith, and live with the one who died for you.

Sixth Word: John 19:30

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished!” Then, bowing his head, he gave up his spirit.

Three words in English. Just one in Greek. The perfectly complete atonement for sin has been completed by Jesus on the cross. He who was declared three years before to be the Lamb of God now declares the sacrifice for all sin finished. He will have more to do and say as the risen Lord for forty days. He will have more to do for 2000 years at least after his Ascension, and he will keep speaking through his Church.

But this is finished. What is the most significant and satisfying task you have ever finished? I have always imagined that it must be very satisfying to complete a pregnancy. To carry a child for nine months and four days and then see the little button nose and that face, hold a new life in your arms and know: I accomplished this. I made this kid and brought her into the world. Maybe, like me, you'll never get the chance to do that. It's not fair, but oh well. If not that, then what? A productive career? A mater's degree?

It's hard to finish anything worthwhile. Sometimes we try and fail to finish even insignificant things. In woodshop I failed to finish a birdhouse. And a jewelry box.

Jesus finishes “it.” He finishes what John the Baptist said he had come to do: take away the sin of the world. You are a sinner. So am I. Your sin and mine is finished because Jesus finished the work of taking it away.

And let's not forget that it was even more than the anguish of the Garden and his friends' fleeing. It was more than the hatred of the religious leaders, more than the brutality of the Romans and the mockery of the crowds. It was more than whips and spears and nails and even more than being forsaken by his Father. It also required his entire perfect life to finish it. It was work three decades in the making.

But even that's too short. From eternity the Father saw and planned this. “It” was in motion before the foundations of the world were laid. For God is love; “it” is his nature to save and reconcile. “It” was an eternity in the making. And now, it is finished.

Do not ever think for a minute that there's anything you have to do to finish it. Jesus did it all for. Your sin is gone. God tells you, “Believe it is finished in Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death.” And you will see the Lamb of God on heaven's throne, because it is finished from eternity into eternity.

Seventh Word: Luke 23:44-46

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun was darkened. Then the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit spirit!” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

The Father was back. Jesus was no longer forsaken. Even while the Father was gone, Jesus’ faith in him never left. And even as he dies, Jesus expresses this perfect confidence that the Father will hold his spirit safe for three days. His body will not see decay, and after those three days the whole Jesus – glorified body and soul – will come out of the grave.

This is what we look forward to now, and we look forward to it with the same confidence as our Savior. Because he finished it just the way the Father willed it, he will rise in glory.

Because he finished it, because he will rise in glory, we join Jesus’ prayer in the hour of our own death. Because in him, we have the promise of our own resurrection.

Black is the color of Good Friday, the day Jesus dies. But the Christian’s heart knows: his spirit is in God’s hands. In him, my spirit is, too. The black of his death is about to be broken by Easter light. And yours and mine will be, too.