

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Father, forgive them

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

The last words spoken by someone who's dying can remind us of the kind of person they were. Take, for example, the words of Oscar Wilde, who took exception to the wallpaper in the room where he lay dying, and said, "One of us has to go."

The words Jesus spoke as he was dying reveal his character. The first words he uttered after the nails had been driven through his hands and feet were a cry to God the Father for all those who were in any way responsible for his being there: "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing."

That was something to ask for, after all the false accusations, the spitting in his face, the floggings, not to mention the crucifixion itself, with passers-by hurling insults and chief priests and elders jeering even as he hung there. But his pleading on their behalf was completely in character. He understood them better than they understood themselves. He saw past the utter vileness of their implacable hatred to the people God had made them to be, and loved them.

I

In what sense could it be true that those who'd had Jesus arrested and crucified didn't know what they were doing, as Jesus claimed for them in his prayer for their forgiveness? Even the Roman governor Pontius Pilate recognised they'd handed Jesus over to him out of envy. They'd decided quite early on that Jesus had to die. He'd condemned them publicly for hypocrisy, and fearlessly exposed their ineffectiveness as spiritual leaders. It was part of what had made him so enormously popular with ordinary people, along with his natural authority, his down-to-earth teaching packaged in memorable stories and illustrations, and worst of all from his opponents' point of view, his supernatural power.

Whatever was in the minds of those opposed to Jesus, it's clear they resented his authority, and feared he was undermining their own. Gradually their fear and resentment became a consuming desire to destroy him.

Of course the religious leaders could have risked the wrath of their Roman overlords, taken the law into their own hands and had Jesus stoned to death. It wasn't unknown for them to do that. As John records in his account of Jesus' life, they *had* tried to stone Jesus, but he'd escaped from their grasp. But at some point it seems they decided to get the Roman governor to convict Jesus of breaking a Roman law, so he'd be sentenced to the Roman punishment of death by crucifixion. Perhaps they had in mind the words of Moses, "Everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed". If they could only get Jesus strung up on a cross, the crowds would have to admit he couldn't possibly be 'the Blessed one', which was how they described the Messiah they were all expecting. So having decided on how he was to die, they laid their plans accordingly. He was arrested, questioned, convicted of blasphemy, then handed over to the Roman governor to be tried for the capital crime of treason.

With such a degree of premeditation, in what sense was it true that those who brought about Jesus' death didn't know what they were doing?

Our own hearts can give us a clue - our lack of self-knowledge, our very fixed ideas, the foolish pride that convinces us we're right, our inability to admit our judgements are often ill-informed and self-interested. There's so much we don't really know, including how great is God's glory, how far short we fall of what he intends us to have and to be, and how perfect is his plan to rescue us from what we are. In the words of Isaiah, God's thoughts are much higher than our thoughts. Our finite minds can't take them in. Our very self-centredness makes his self-giving love incomprehensible.

But it would seem from Jesus' first prayer from the cross that our blindness only serves to awaken his compassion, and his longing that we might be forgiven.

II

Jesus' opponents, we presume, were confident they did know what they were doing, and that what they were doing was right. That confidence, however ill-founded, is part of the human condition which Jesus understood so well. Generations before them, Moses, from whom they were so proud to be descended, had also been too confident of his own knowledge and experience. That confidence had got in the way of Moses listening, humbly and carefully, to what God was communicating.

The people Moses led out of Egypt had arrived at a place called Kadesh. They needed water, and as they had on other occasions during their wanderings around the Sinai peninsular, they complained bitterly to Moses and Aaron. They wished they were dead, they said. They questioned Moses, "Why did you bring the Lord's community out of Egypt, for us and our livestock to die here in this terrible place, where there's no grain, no figs, no grapevines, no pomegranates?" Not to mention no drinking water. Moses and Aaron fell to prayer, and were directed by God to get water from a certain rock, by speaking to it. But Moses spoke what a later songwriter would call "rash words", words that suggest a sense of superiority, an almost swaggering self-confidence. After all, he'd done this sort of thing before, so had no need to listen carefully to God's instructions.

"Listen, you rebels," he said, "must I bring you water out of this rock?" Then he raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Out came water, and the community and their livestock drank.

But God said to Moses, "Because you didn't trust me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

Moses was God's greatest spokesman, sent by God set his people free. For forty years he'd led the Israelites and endured their constant complaints. He'd brought them to the edge of the place God had promised them. He'd given them God's instructions on how they were to live there. Yet even he succumbed to the temptation to confidence in his own ability. The result was that he actually took for himself a portion of the glory that belongs to God. Not even Moses' wisdom and long years of faithful service could have produced water in the desert.

Not even the knowledge and status of the religious leaders of Jesus' day could ensure they knew what they were doing. We are all in the same position, whether we acknowledge it or not, of needing, daily and hourly, to depend on God for the wisdom to know what to do and the strength to do it.

Here are some questions we might ask about things we've done which we wish we could undo. Did we do them in the proud and foolish confidence that we knew best? Did we think we knew best because we'd got into the habit of not acknowledging how much we depend on God? Were we even presuming to take for ourselves something of the credit that belongs to God?

III

Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, has said that if he could only convince the patients at his psychiatric hospitals their sins have been forgiven, 75% of them could walk out the next day. Guilt is very destructive of our peace of mind, our emotional and even our physical health. The great news is that Jesus lived and died for this very purpose: to deliver us from our unbearable burden of guilt. His cry from the cross, "Father, forgive them," expresses what he wants for every person who's ever been led astray by foolish pride and ignorance of God's ways. But it's his death as the sinless sin-bearer that turns the possibility of forgiveness into a certainty for all who believe he died in their place.

Some might ask why an all-powerful, all-loving God doesn't simply go ahead and pronounce everyone to be forgiven. Why go to the extraordinary lengths of taking on human form in Jesus? Why go through the whole horrible business of being slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb, before he can consider the damage we do to be paid for? But if we dare to think God didn't have to go that far, we underestimate the very real damage our sin actually does. We reveal how little we know of the pain God must feel at seeing the world he loves so broken and divided by human folly and pride. What Jesus said from the cross is true of all of us. We don't know, or we play down, the full implications of all the ways we wrong God and wrong each other.

Jesus' perceptiveness and kindness stand in the starkest contrast to our wilful ignorance and hardened hearts. He was filled with compassion for the sick and suffering, the desperate and despondent. Dishonest tax-collectors and prostitutes filled with shame were drawn to him, and he assured them of God's forgiveness. He was prepared to break the religious law by touching lepers to heal them and dead bodies to bring them to life.

But on the cross he went even further when he asked for forgiveness for those who hated him enough to kill him. That kind of compassion is almost beyond our comprehension. It was the supreme example of turning the other cheek as he'd taught his disciples to do. He actually did what for many is an impossible ideal.

We do have evidence that his prayer was heard and answered. We read that after his resurrection and departure and after the Holy Spirit had come to his followers, "the word about him continued to spread. The number of believers increased in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became his disciples." Saul was a Pharisee, a member of a group who'd wanted Jesus dead. He zealously persecuted Jesus' followers. But then he came to see himself as the chief of sinners and Jesus as his only hope of salvation. He spent the rest of his life spreading the news of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. Such is the power of Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them."

Conclusion

The story is told of a fire in a farmer's barn. After it had been put out the farmer was sifting through the remains when his foot kicked over the blackened body of one of his hens. As he looked down, out from under her ran all her fluffy little chicks, alive and well. Instead of fleeing the fire and leaving them behind, she'd sat down and covered them with her body. She'd saved their lives at the cost of her own.

No mere example can adequately describe what Jesus has done for us. But why was he willing to pay such a price?

The German preacher Thielicke said this:

Jesus saw people as God originally designed them to be. He saw through the grime and dirt to the real person underneath. He saw their sin as something alien that claimed and mastered them and from which he could free them to be their real selves.

Thank you, Father, for seeing past the many layers of grime in our lives, past the wilful ignorance and the overweening pride. And thank you for paying, through Jesus, the awful cost of it all. Amen.