

# The First Saying from the Cross

*Meditation presented by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
at First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
Good Friday, March 21, 2008*

## **Luke 23:32-38**

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

## **Meditation**

Whatever else Good Friday may be about, it certainly is about forgiveness. The first words from Jesus' mouth as his execution began were these: "Father, forgive them . . ." Good Friday is about forgiveness. And the first people to be forgiven . . . (*I imagine that when Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them . . .," his plea was granted. It was a dying man's last request of his God and Father, after all. And Good Friday is about forgiveness.*) And the first people to be forgiven were the ones who put Jesus on the cross. The ones who didn't know what they were doing, but did it any way. Oh, they had their reasons for nailing Jesus up. Political reasons. Religious reasons. Shrewd reasons. Foolish reasons. But Jesus prayed, and they were forgiven. Good Friday is certainly about forgiveness.

**And it wasn't only the conspirators and the executioners who were forgiven.** We all put Jesus on that cross. We're all guilty. Good and evil are twisted together in every human heart. Good and evil shape our presidential elections and our foreign policy. Good and evil shape our suppertime conversations and our Sunday morning worship. Put another way, sin is a bucket of nails. And each of us is holding a hammer. We know how Jesus came to be pinned to that cross. But somehow Jesus death on the cross takes care of all that.

I don't know how it happened – the church has theorized and theologized about it for ages – but somehow Jesus' death on the cross dealt with sin, and it dealt with the requirements of justice. And at the same time, his death on the cross dealt with the demands of mercy and love. On that cross, sin was condemned and sinners forgiven. Somehow. And it began here, "Father, forgive them . . ."

The first sin to be forgiven? The sin of putting Jesus to death. The first sinners to be forgiven? Every one of us who has picked up a hammer and reached into the bucket of nails that is sin. Forgiveness begins with the conspirators and the executioners, every one of us.

**A few years ago, I read a book by Kemp Powers called The Shooting.** When he was about fourteen years old, Kemp Powers and two of his friends used to play with guns. One day, young Kemp Powers accidentally shot and killed his best friend Henry. A nightmare of swirling, confusing events followed. Kemp Powers struggled to regain his equilibrium. He was dazed. He was caught off guard again and again.

He was caught off guard because his mother forgave him. (It was her gun.) He was caught off guard because the state of New York forgave him. And he was especially caught off guard because Henry's

parents forgave him. That was totally unexpected. Kemp Powers expected a kick in the gut. Instead he got a long hug.

Kemp Powers' story started me to thinking. Is there anything harder to forgive than when someone has killed your child? And what if it was your only child? And what if the killing wasn't by accident but was on purpose? What could be harder to forgive than that? And suppose you have forgiven someone for killing your only child, and for doing it on purpose. Once you have forgiven that, what will you not forgive?

Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them . . . forgive them for putting me to death . . . forgive them for picking up the hammers . . . forgive them for conspiring . . . forgive them for cracking the whip . . . forgive them for every insult and humiliation . . ." Jesus prays, and the Father grants his request.

Here's the question: If the Father forgives us for killing his only Son – and he does – is there anything he will not forgive? I wonder about this. And I think I know the answer, an answer consistent with the Apostle's words in Romans 8: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?"

**There's an old tradition in my church.** During celebrations of Holy Communion, we would say that Jesus' body was given and his blood was shed "for the complete forgiveness of all our sins." For the complete forgiveness of all our sins. Complete forgiveness begins with the very first forgiveness, when Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them . . ." Good Friday may be about more than that. But it is at least about that.