

There is something quite significant about the last words of someone when they come facing death. I love the last words of Spike Milligan, the comedian, which actually made it to his epitaph. It reads, "I told you I was ill". Or what about the great Leonardo da Vinci who with modesty apparently said this, "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have." And according to Steve Jobs' sister Mona, the Founder of Apple, his last words were, "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

Over the next 7 weeks as we journey through the season of Lent and move towards Easter, we are going to be thinking about the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross which have also been known as his last seven words. But I suppose the danger with that is an ignorance to what he said when he rose again. Jesus had quite a lot more to say before he returned to heaven forty days after coming back to life. So I suppose those are his true last words.

But over the next 7 weeks we are going to look at these, and what they mean for us in our own lives. Lent is a time of deep reflection in the Christian faith. It should be marked in a different way to other seasons in the Church calendar. It's a time to reflect on how we live our lives, to repent, to "get real", and to get right again with God, with ourselves and others. This is a period where we need to create time and space to allow the journey and pain of the cross to permeate into our thoughts and attitudes in life. So that's the next 7 weeks examining these phrases of Jesus.

And today, we're going to focus on those words of Jesus when on the cross he prayed to God, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

But first, watch this little clip  
[VIDEO – Charlie bit me]

The truth is folks, that from an early age all of us have been hurt in many different ways by different people – some who might have been very close to us. And these wounds can leave us with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness or even revenge. But I wonder did you realise that health professionals tell us the benefits that come when we do forgive those who have hurt us.

Forgiveness can lead to

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual and psychological well-being
- Less anxiety and stress
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- A stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- And higher self-esteem

So as we begin to look at how God forgave, let's all ask ourselves this question this morning: "Am I currently holding a grudge against another person? Is there someone who has hurt me that I have not been able to forgive? Maybe this is someone who actually is dead, but

the lack of forgiveness continues on in us. Does the thought of that person raise my blood pressure, cause me to feel depressed or angry?"

I want you to take a minute and think if there's a situation where you cannot forgive. And I want to pray for us all right now, that God by his Spirit would soften our hearts in that situation, reflecting on these powerful words of Jesus on the cross.

(pause)

How painful is that feeling of hurt in us. How does it compare I wonder to the passage today? In our passage today the very first verse tells us that they crucified Jesus.

We've heard it so often, but I wonder have we possibly lost the sense of how cruel this punishment actually was. We cannot begin to imagine the agony that Jesus endured while upon the cross. The physical suffering would have been horrifying. By the time Jesus got to the cross he had been beaten and whipped severely. His back had been torn to shreds by the whip which typically had little nails running through it so that as it pulled back it would remove chunks of flesh as it recoiled. His face was disfigured and swollen from the beating. On his head a crown of thorns penetrated deep into the skin.

And so the passage says they crucified Him

They laid the cross out on the ground and they laid the body of Jesus on it. They pierced his hands and his feet by driving spikes through them all. And as the cross was lifted into place the entire weight of his body would have placed further pressure on those nails and on his organs. And as He hung naked, beaten, when everyone who passed by mocked Him; when the chief priests and scribes, even those thieves who were crucified with Him taunted Him and teased Him in His agony, the first words Jesus said as His body was in shock and He struggled for breath was a prayer. And it wasn't just any prayer; it was a shockingly radical prayer. It was a prayer of perfect love and compassion. Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Such pain, and yet such mercy.

I want us to quickly examine the elements of this prayer, which should help us in our own journey towards forgiveness.

Firstly, it's a prayer of relationship to our Father God

"Father", was the first word that was spoken by Jesus. "Father." It is a word of relationship - beyond any other relationship. No one used this term like Jesus used this term. God the Father had an extremely intimate relationship with God the Son. In John 10:30, Jesus declared the intimacy of his relationship with his Father when he said, "I and the Father are one."

Jesus knew the Father intimately, and yet every week we pray the Lord's Prayer, and we begin with those words, "Our Father".

Folks, he is our Father, and we can pray this because of Jesus. We can bring the pressures and the hurt and the pain that we feel to our Father. Jesus is hanging upon the cross. He's beaten. He's bloody. He's bruised. But he still has power of the Father on his side. And therefore as we approach the issue of forgiveness, we know that God is with us in the pain.

Secondly, Jesus says, "Father, forgive".

Question : When someone attacks you, or makes allegations about you, what do you think becomes the focus of your thoughts? You most likely will focus on the injustice it has brought on you, and therefore the obvious revenge that should be returned. You will focus on the pain you are experiencing right now. But in this passage Christ is not concerned about his physical wellbeing. He's not praying that the suffering might end. He is not seeking a way in which to avoid torture and death. Instead he's praying for the needs of those who were responsible for His crucifixion. "Father, forgive"

He could have prayed, "Father, destroy them." He could have prayed, "Father, condemn them." But He didn't. He could have prayed, "Father, take away the pain. Father, lessen my suffering. Father, give me strength." But He didn't. This is astounding!!! Can you imagine this amount of mercy being shown? This is love beyond all measure.

He prayed for humanity's greatest need. His desire was to see people receive forgiveness. His desire was to see people receive salvation. His passion was to provide for their redemption. And the prophet Isaiah, some 700 years prior to this says, 'But he [Jesus] was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed'. Isaiah 53:5

Today's society seems to be built in such a different way – it wants justice or revenge. And can I suggest to each of you that if we as Christians demonstrate something which is not forgiveness, then we demonstrate nothing different than anyone else who does not hold to the Christian faith. And you might say, "Ah but Jonny, you don't know what my husband did to me", or "Jonny, she lied to me". Yeah that's right I don't know your situation, but I sure do know what I personally have done to Christ, because in my unforgiveness I simply nail him further onto that cross.

Which leads me very naturally onto the third thing that Jesus prays. He prays, "Father, forgive them". You might already consider that the 'them' in this sentence means soldiers who crucified him, the them is also "Pilate' who allowed Jesus to be crucified, the 'them' also refers to Judas who betrayed Jesus. And so on and so on.

But I think we've missed someone in the crowd whose also guilty of the crime. That's you and me. We might not have lived 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem, but we are guilty. All of us sent Jesus to the cross. Jesus didn't go to the cross because of some crime that he committed. There was nothing that the leaders could find guilty in him. He was without sin. But Jesus went to cross because of sin - and who is sitting here today that is sinless? That's right – no one. All of us have fallen short of God's glory. Paul writing to the Romans says "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God". Romans 3:23

And so as Jesus hangs on the cross, grasping for every word, he uses those last breaths to pray forgiveness on each one of us. If that doesn't sink deep into our hearts right now, then folks I'm not sure that we have a heart at all. It should bring us to our knees.

And I think that's why Jesus' prayer goes further to say 'forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'. Today, you might be sitting and saying 'Jonny, I'm not perfect but I'm a good person'. Folks your goodness in this world is not the same as a relationship with Jesus. That's just about being a good person, but it doesn't bring everlasting hope. Forgiveness can only be found in receiving Jesus into your heart. When you truly understand the forgiveness that you have received then it changes your attitude to how you forgive others.

Those of us who choose to follow Jesus are called by God to forgive as we have been forgiven. That's some pretty heavy words, and I appreciate how tough they are. It can be very hard to forgive. I know this, because I myself held an attitude of unforgiveness in my heart for a father, even 6 years after his death. And when we've been hurt by someone we love and trust, we will become angry, sad or confused. When we are treated in a way that we resent we can easily be swallowed up in bitterness, a desire for revenge, or even thinking that wiping the very existence of the individual out of our minds is going to fix it. But in allowing God to guide us and enable us to let go of grudges, we might just find that our lives will no longer be defined by how we have been hurt.

There can be no doubt that forgiveness is the answer to so much of the pain in this world. War is about getting even, forgiveness is about getting along. It's the key to relationships, and every area of life. If we hold grudges we are going to be miserable people. But again, forgiveness is hard. Even the disciples struggled with forgiveness. They asked Jesus, "How often must we forgive? Is seven times enough?" Jesus replied, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." In essence, we are to keep forgiving and forgiving and forgiving – we don't stop. On the Cross, Jesus' first words were the Gospel in a nutshell--"Father forgive them." It's the reason Jesus came to this earth, to forgive us, save us and make us new.

And part of our newness of life is to live our lives on the model of Jesus, learning to forgive others. In the sermon on the mount Jesus taught, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Then He taught His disciples to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And He then instructed us to pray: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

If we pray that this morning, but have someone in our minds that we can't forgive, then can I ask you, why do you pray it?

Let's all ask ourselves this question this morning: "Have I a grudge against another person? Is there someone who has hurt me (maybe current, maybe in the past, that I have not been able to forgive? Does the very thought of that person annoy me? "

So as we close, let's take a moment to think about people who have wronged us, and then in a minute I will pray a simple prayer, "Father, forgive them". And then I ask you to leave all

your anger and all your pain at the foot of the Cross where our Jesus died to remove it forever.

If there's a particular situation that has been in your mind this morning around forgiveness, and you would like someone else to pray for you, then stay around after.