

**Good Friday 2022
Watch and Pray - at Shepreth
12.00pm - 1.0 pm**

The words from the cross

Introduction

In our two separate hours of watch and pray on this Good Friday we are looking at the words from the cross. At 2 o'clock in Foxton Angela will be looking at a second set, but here we are looking at three sets of words:

First, 'Father Forgive'

Second, 'today you will be with me in paradise'

Third, 'Woman, here is your son.'

For each set of words we have a reading from the bible which will be followed by a couple of minutes of silence for you to reflect on that reading, after which I will then share some thoughts on the reading, before a second period of silence. We also have some hymns and a piece of music to listen to, and if all goes well, that will be our first hour at the cross.

Hymn : 499 There is a Green Hill Far Away
Read Luke 23:26-34 **"Father forgive..."**
Talk 1

Forgive

If there is one single word that more people would link to Jesus dying on the cross than any other it is the word "forgive". Or is it I wonder? For the Christian the whole purpose of Jesus dying on the cross is so that our sins are forgiven, but for the non-believer I rather suspect many see this as a barbaric, unnecessary act against someone who was framed by the Jewish authorities, and the non-believer would not see anything beyond that than a miscarriage of justice.

But then a few other words sneak in that make us consider our simple link between the cross and forgiveness a bit deeper. Father forgive. Jesus, about to die on the cross, is calling out to his father, because he cannot do anything alone. Don't forget the characters involved here. Jesus, the Son of God, God in human form, on the earth, living as a human man, cannot do any of the supernatural activities that are both expected and required of him, without his Father's help. So, Father forgive.

Father, forgive them. Them? Who would that be then I wonder. We have just heard that there were criminals one on his left and one on his right who were crucified with him. Are they the them? The soldiers were about to cast lots for his clothing, as was predicted by the psalmist in Psalm 22, are the soldiers the them? Or was it the Jewish authorities who had trumped up the charges which meant he was being wrongly crucified who were the them? Or was it all of us who at some points in our lives would let Jesus down? Are we the them? This forgiveness is not just available to a limited amount of people identified in the story, but to everyone, if they are simply prepared to ask for it. Who are the them? Who are not is perhaps the better question.

Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. There are indeed many times when we can all fall into that category. Is Jesus simply saying that the them, whoever that is, don't know what they have just done, or that they are stumbling through lives not knowing what they are supposed to be doing. Father forgive, is not just a one off forgiveness, it a forgiveness for ever. It is a forgiveness for what we have done, and a forgiveness for what we will do wrong in the future when we do not know what we are doing.

Father forgive. It is that request, that plea from Jesus to his Father, our God, that makes sense of what is going on in this barbaric act. It is the reason for this sacrifice which out does any other sacrifice. It happens because God loves each and every one of us, and through the sacrifice of the life of His son, he has given us forgiveness for eternity.

Father, thank you.

Music or song (recorded): At the foot of the cross

Hymn: 298 Let there be love, vs 1-3

Reading Luke 23:35-43 "today you will be with me in paradise"

Talk 2

'today you will be with me in paradise'

The conversation between the two criminals who, don't forget, are not just standing around having a chat, but have been nailed to crosses – an unbelievably painful method of execution, must be one of the most strange episodes in the whole bible – and that is not in any way ignoring the strangeness of some of the episodes that precede this one. But just picture it for a moment – this is a conversation between two people, talking about a third person, who is also on a cross, in between the two of them. So they are talking about, and across, Jesus.

Such has been the fervour against Jesus whipped up by the Jewish authorities, that even these criminals have heard it, and one of them simply cannot resist the opportunity to join in the banter. "Are you not the Messiah?" and then he has the audacity to say, "Save yourself and us". Was he just poking fun at

Jesus, or did he actually believe that Jesus could save him? We are led to believe that this criminal did not believe anything of the sort, but the other criminal – now there is a different story.

“Do you not fear God?” he starts. Our second criminal is clearly not, like the first, siding with the Jewish authorities, but recognises something, even from the position he finds himself in, in Jesus that attracts him. He also understands that Jesus is not guilty of anything (unlike them), and so he makes his impassioned plea to Jesus. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus, as he always will when someone comes to him asking for help, responds positively with our second set of words. “Truly I tell you ... today you will be with me in paradise’ ”

There are two things we can learn from Jesus’ response to the criminal. First, yes, anyone can give their lives to Jesus at any point – it is never too late, there is nothing that can get in the way whatever you have done. Jesus will forgive you if you make the effort to just ask. I think its worth adding at this point that different people have different views on the order in which things need to happen. Some will say that you must first repent of your sins and then give yourself to Jesus, whereas others, myself included, believe that Jesus doesn’t care what you have done in the past, just give your life to him, and all the repenting that is required will naturally follow. When Jesus responded to the criminal, there were no questions, Jesus didn’t say, “What have you done?”, he just accepted the criminal as he was, and told him, “today you will be with me in paradise ”.

The second thing to pick up is the word today. This is the ultimate display of Luke’s understanding of the immediacy of salvation. The criminal asks Jesus for help and Jesus, in effect, says, “you are saved as of now”. God’s plan has come into effect not despite, but through, the crucifixion of his Son Jesus. When we commit our lives to following Jesus, we have entered paradise. In earthly terms, it may frequently feel like anything but that, but in terms of God’s kingdom, we are in.

But what I would say, finally, on these words, is this. I have no idea what this Paradise will look like when our time on this earth is over. The book of Revelation gives all sorts of thoroughly complicated images of how that eternal paradise will come about which, lets face it, often sound quite horrendous. But that is not something for us to worry about. Paradise is called paradise for a reason – and that is because it will be something unbelievably special.

The last chapter of revelation includes this:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found

there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

"today you will be with me in paradise".

Hymn: 53 Be still for the presence of the Lord

Reading John 19:19 -27

Woman behold your son

Talk 3

"Woman, here is your son"

The last two and a half verses of our third reading are the sort of verses that keep bible commentators happy for ages as there are so many possibilities as to what is going on. In order for us to understand our third set of words, "Woman, here is your son", we first have to work out who the women are and what they are doing at the cross, and who "the disciple whom he loved" was – or at least we have to try and remove some of the possibilities.

We are not helped by the four gospel writers having slightly different accounts of which women were where in terms of the cross. John refers to, "his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene". Its worth noting up to this point, John had not named Jesus' mother – but the other gospel writers are so strong on it being Mary we can go with that.

But are there two, three or four women here? This can be read different ways: "his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene" or "his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene", perhaps saying that Jesus' mother is now Mary the wife of Clopas (whoever he was), and that Jesus' mother's sister is Mary Magdalene? Unlikely that two sisters would be called Mary but not impossible. Yes, Jesus' mother could have married again and become Mary the wife of Clopas – but again unlikely and we have no evidence. I have to say that I read all the possibilities that my commentator came up with, and was mightily relieved that his conclusion was that there were four women – three probably called Mary and one un-named, and that these four women were regular supporters of Jesus.

Another favourite topic is who was the disciple Jesus loved? And this then becomes rather more of a key point than how many women there were. The point is this. What Jesus appears to be doing from the cross is to clear up some earthly business before he dies: in this case to make sure that his mother is looked after. According to Jewish custom Jesus' brothers should look after Jesus' mother, but this has been made complicated. There is plenty of evidence in John's gospel that Jesus' mother had become something of a disciple of Jesus, which accounts for why she was there at the cross at all, but we heard

earlier in John's gospel that, 'not even Jesus' brothers believed in him.' From this we can assume that there would either have been a fallout between mother and her other sons, or at least one of her other sons had become a disciple and had taken on the mantle of the disciple whom Jesus loved.

But there is another possibility – and that is that Jesus' mother had estranged herself from her non-believing sons, and she was treating the disciples as her new adopted family. And Jesus was now taking this a step further by saying to the disciple whom he loved (who we last heard of at the last supper) "Here is your mother" and to his mother "Woman, here is your son".

All of which is a fascinating analysis – but I finish with a somewhat strange question, having just tried to explain it all to you – how much of that really matters? I am certainly not going to turn round and say, "None of it", because everything that is included in scripture is there for a reason. But what I would say is sometimes the detail can get in the way of overall message.

When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment he said to love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind – and the second is like it – love your neighbour as yourself. Is the second half of Jesus' reply saying exactly what he is saying here, from the cross, just before he dies.

He is saying to two people who he clearly cares for, the disciple whom he loved, whoever that might be, and his mother,

"Look after each other. This is what I have taught you about Christian community and so stick with it."

"Woman, here is your son"

**hymn: 255 It is a thing most wonderful
When I survey (recorded)**