

SEVEN LAST WORDS

Lenten Reflections for Today's Believers



ALICE CAMILLE

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THE FIRST WORD



*Father, forgive them;
for they do not know what they are doing.*

THE FIRST WORD

HUMILITY

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."

Luke 23:33-34

A FRIEND has betrayed him. His own religious leaders have handed him over to the enemy, and he has been condemned to death. One of his closest companions has denied he even knows him. His longtime disciples have deserted him. Strangers drive nails into his body, and crowds who do not care about his love or his Father are making a joke of his suffering.

And Jesus forgives them all. Forgives Judas and the High Priest and Pilate and Peter. He forgives the followers who had no courage, the soldiers who perform the crucifixion, and the people who seek to humiliate him in the very act of their ridicule. Jesus does not wait for them to say they are sorry, to come to him with contrition, to prove they have changed. He asks his Father's forgiveness for them even as they are putting him to death, even though no one shows a hint of remorse.

This is such a staggering, unheard of, inconceivable act of forgiveness that it is easy to overlook the rest of what Jesus says. We are lost in a place between awe and horror at the nobility of one who forgives in this way. We

feel awe at the largeness of such a spirit and horror that we may be asked to do the same, to forgive with such generosity. We feel sure that we can't. It is hard enough to forgive those who regret the injury they have caused. To forgive those who do not seek our forgiveness or show concern for our suffering seems to be asking too much.

To follow the example of Jesus, we have to hear *all* of what he says. First of all, he does not say, "I forgive you." He says, *Father, forgive them*. What we in our humanity cannot dream of doing, God in full divinity can and will. We can pray for God's forgiveness of our enemies. We can ask God to go beyond the limitations of the human heart and do what God does best: forgive a sinful creation.

This is an important lesson to learn from Jesus because the culture in which we live tells a much different story. The ancient code of an eye for an eye is very much alive and well. If people cause harm, people ought to pay. Restitution may be a form of justice, but the forgiveness Jesus teaches goes beyond justice to the new covenant of mercy. If God exacted from us pure justice, no one would be saved, as the disciples once fearfully understood. But the forgiveness Jesus preached and offered, to the last hour on the cross, requires no eye-for-an-eye restitution. It is God's free gift. It can't be bought or earned or deserved.

We don't need to wait for restoration to forgive those who wrong us. We don't have to wait for healing to come or for our emotions to catch up to our Christian duty. We can ask God to forgive our enemies *for* us, as Jesus did. Only then can real healing begin. For when we hold no one bound who sins against us, neither are we held bound by the desire for vengeance.

Father, forgive them. It is a staggering proposition, but the reason Jesus offers is even more stunning: *they do not know what they are doing.* What gets sinners off the hook is not our goodness, our contrition, our well-meaning intentions, or our pledge to do better. It is our ignorance that makes us eligible for forgiveness. A truly humbling thought!

The creation story in Genesis sheds light on this mystery. The Evil One uses knowledge as a temptation: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil.” And, in fact, the eyes of the first couple are opened and they do come out of innocence into a kind of knowledge. But knowledge without wisdom is hopelessly crippled. They see, but they do not understand. And their actions betray their ignorance.

The seven capital sins are all rooted in this original ignorance. We are proud, because we do not see how small and fallible we are. We are greedy because we think things can bring us happiness. We are lazy because we have grain enough stored in the barn for tomorrow—forgetting that tomorrow may not come. We envy others, not seeing how jealousy poisons our ability to love. We harbor anger and forget the mandate to seek reconciliation. We see others through the prism of lust and distort them into mere objects for our own satisfaction. We approach food or drink or other pleasures gluttonously, forgetting our responsibility to those who do not have what they need to survive.

All of those responsible for the crucifixion acted out of a destructive ignorance. Judas didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah of God, and fear blinded Peter's faith. Caiaphas

could only see as far as the boundary of his authority, which was threatened by the teachings of this rabbi. Pilate had a similar blind spot beyond his own jurisdiction. The soldiers were just following orders. The crowds were following custom. Everybody had an excuse for how they acted, and all of them did not know what they were doing and to whom.

So what is the answer to original ignorance? The virtue of humility. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux said it simply: "There are only four virtues: humility, humility, humility, and humility." In the presence of this great virtue, pride gets down on its knees. Greed opens its hands. Sloth tends to its responsibilities. Envy looks away from its neighbor. Anger forgets its grudge. Lust remembers the person behind the obsession and is stilled. Gluttony puts down its fork and extends its plate to someone else. Humility resolves all conflict, forgives every enemy, and lives in peace with everyone.

Humility makes us wince because it sounds like humiliation, and no one wants to be humiliated. Others tried to humiliate Jesus on the cross. He showed them humility in return. In humiliation there is shame, but in humility, great dignity. Humiliation comes when someone is brought low. Humility is when one bends low for the sake of others. As Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians:

Though he was in the form of God,
[Jesus] did not deem equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

This kind of behavior can't be found much because it does not seek to be discovered. Do not trust anyone who says, "I am humble." The wearer of the humble pin is automatically disqualified by definition from wearing it.

Humility must be practiced in private. Recognition that we are all sinners is the foundation of this virtue. Even Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be clung

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to—yet it is amazing how many church-going people act as if that is the goal of religion. In a Catholic celebration of the Eucharist, a priest once gave this call at communion time: "This table is set for sinners! May the sinners come forward; the righteous can all go home." Not a soul in the church was deterred from receiving the sacrament by this summons. True humility is knowing who we really are. We are sinners, and Christ didn't die for anyone else.

Some people have grown tired of feel-bad religion, the kind that makes them languish in guilt and feel paralyzed in attempts to do better. The knowledge that we are sinners is not to make us feel hateful but to know how

loved we are. Being sinners, we can abandon the game of pretending we are perfect. Being sinners ourselves, we find it easier to forgive others. Being sinners, we know there is much we don't know, and that is a great relief. We can lay down the burden of trying to save ourselves by our righteousness and let God do the saving.

People who know that God saves are said to be born again. Jesus invites us to start over in just this image. When Jesus said we have to become like little children to follow him to the Kingdom, he didn't mean for us to get cute and cuddly or to become innocent again. No one born into original sin can find the way back to a pre-sinful state. But children are eager to learn, and in their natural humility they know there is much to learn. To become like children, we have to abandon the adult premise that we know it all and sit at the feet of the Teacher again.

This goes against everything our culture tells us about what it means to be a successful person. Successful people are supposed to have all the answers, believe in their own personal power, and control their own destinies. To say "I don't know" is to betray weakness, and that is a big mistake. To ask "Teach me" is to lose the position of superiority over another. To say "I was wrong" is to prove mortality, which simply means we know we are not God.

The psychologist Rollo May offered this axiom for truly successful living: "I am human, therefore limited, therefore imperfect, therefore disappointing to myself and others." This is not negative self-talk; this is a reality check! This might not make a bad addition to one's evening prayer practice, an hour the church has always recommended for reflection and reconciliation. At the end

of the day, we see all the ways we took shortcuts with integrity, preferring expedience to kindness, the selfish motive to the generous, judgment to the compassionate response.

Saint Philip Neri prayed this prayer every day: “Lord, watch Philip: he will betray you!” What our culture might dismiss as a poor self-image on Philip’s part, we can see in the light of faith as a clear-eyed view of the truth about ourselves. Not one of us is beyond the temptation to look out for Number One by telling little white lies, gossiping to bring others down, or being silent in the face of injustice. Just as we seek Christ in those who are suffering we can also see the contents of our own hearts mirrored in the most wretched of sinners. “There, but for God’s grace, go I.” The humble person understands that no human life is so very different from any other, no matter how extreme the events that shape each one.

The great danger for the so-called good person is to think that he or she cannot sin or cannot descend as far into sin as others have. “I could never murder,” a man says to himself. “I could never commit adultery,” a woman insists. The Evil One is tempted by such challenges to the real power of sin, and such ignorance can bring a person to ruin. The holy person, with the wisdom reaped in humility, will only say, “Lord, preserve me from the near occasion of this sin.”

We do not know what we are doing. We think we are clever, self-possessed, and have a greater degree of self-knowledge than others, perhaps because we pray, meditate, or take days for recollection and retreat. But the human will to get more than what we already have nests

in every heart like a cobra waiting to assert itself.

Theologians call this concupiscence, or desire, which is the fatal effect of original sin. We humans are not satisfied even in Paradise but are ever seeking more. That part of us that is made for eternity yearns to express its likeness to divinity in ways that eclipse our obedience to God. Instead of seeking God, we seek ourselves and serve the wrong master.

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Imagine a room in which God is at the center and two people are in the Divine Presence. One person kneels at the foot of God and another stands at the door, one

hand turning the knob. Which person is closer to God?

Western tradition would lead us to guess at once that the person right next to God is closer. But in the Buddhist tradition, the answer would depend on the direction each person was facing. The person kneeling at the foot of God may be turned away, while the person at the door may be glancing back eager to return. If a person is close to God but moving away, he or she will never reach the Divine Presence. But a person turned to God, no matter how far away, will come into the embrace of God in time.

Jesus asked his Father to forgive his betrayers and tormentors because of their ignorance. Humility is the virtue of knowing we possess a frail and partial knowledge

of the ways of good and evil. Humility leads us to become like little children, to seek wisdom at the foot of the cross. As Saint Paul tells us, “Now we see as in a mirror, dimly. But then we will see face to face.”