

Luke 23:32-56

Sunday of the Passion

April 5, 1998

The Roman governor said, "I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of any of your charges against him."

A thief on the cross declared, "We have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

The centurion when he saw what had taken place in Jesus' dying praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Innocent.

Innocent.

Innocent.

Three witnesses declaring him innocent.

And in between all sorts of voices crying, "Crucify him."

Voices scoffing, "He saved others let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one"

Voices mocking, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

Another thief's voice deriding, "Are you not the Messiah, save yourself and us!"

And in the midst of the voices declaring him innocent, and the voices mocking, deriding, Jesus speaks three times from the cross Luke tells us.

First the prayer, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Who are they who do not know what they are doing?

Pilate who gives permission to crucify an innocent man?

Crowds that cry "Crucify him at the urging of their leaders?"

Leaders who think they will buy some peace, some security at the expense of Jesus' death?

I who am to be an ambassador for Christ yet whose words and deeds so often mock and deny him?

You who only let Jesus into the edges of your life?

Could a word from Jesus bring forgiveness to all of us - the slate wiped clean?

Can this word of Jesus be stretched so far as to cover all of my life, all of yours? Could Jesus' forgiveness even be stretched to cover those times when we do know what we are doing and do it defiantly - like a child crashing right through the "no" erected in his path? That would

be a great forgiveness indeed. Jesus would just die to be able to give out that kind of forgiveness.

To the kind thief Jesus promised, "Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise."

Had he earned the promise with his words, his defense of Jesus before the other thief? Remember how he said it? "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Oh, his heart was right - thief that he was, but mine is not. If it is his heart and his words that earn him paradise then I am left further from God than ever.

Or is he really a thief through and through, stealing paradise with a simple request, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Then let us all be thieves, stealing life eternal that is deserved only by the good.

And then Jesus' last words, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

When everything that had happened cried out that God was absent Jesus trusted.

His innocence, even the public speaking of his innocence had counted for nothing.

His trusting in his Father had not kept the lashes of the whip from falling on his back.

His cry for forgiveness for his enemies had not silenced their ridicule.

He was dying.

Yet he trusted the Father's hands beneath him, ready to catch him as he fell into death.

Will he plant his prayer in my heart, in yours? Will his death be so powerful that it will be able to give faith to faithless ones? Forgiveness to those who do inexcusable deeds?

Salvation to those who would be stealing it?

Jesus died to make it so.