

## He Prays for Us—Even from the Cross

Focus: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”—Luke 23:34a (KJV)

It is ironical that perhaps the most beautiful sentence in the Passion Narrative [Luke 23:34a] should be textually dubious. The sentiment behind it is the essence of responding to hostility in what came to be thought of as a Christian manner. This word of Jesus would surely have been a prime factor leading to Dante’s judgment on Luke as “the scribe of the gentleness of Christ.” . . . [But even] if these words were added by a scribe, the scribe’s insight would be an authentic interpretation of the Lucan Christ. Alas, too often not the absence of this prayer from the text, but the failure to incorporate it into one’s heart has been the real problem.—Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*.

### First Scripture Lesson: Luke 6:27-31

Our first Scripture Lesson is from Luke’s Gospel—from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain.” That’s right: Sermon on the *Plain*.

Most of us are more familiar with Jesus’ Sermon on the *Mount*, which is in Matthew’s Gospel. The two share some of the same material, in some cases, word for word, but there are also significant differences between them, even beyond the topography of the location.

So did Matthew get it right? Or Luke? Or maybe Jesus actually did deliver two different sermons—and the differences arise because he was recycling his material, which preachers, as you know, sometimes do.

More on such questions later. But for now, look for this: during Holy Week, on his way to the cross, Jesus will indeed practice what he preached in *both* sermons, especially when it comes to prayer. “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew) and “pray for those who abuse you” (Luke).

Listen now for God’s Word as it has been entrusted to us. Luke chapter 6, verses 27-31:

“But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

The Word of the Lord.

### Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 23: 26-34

Trigger warning: if the thought of the Bible being uncertain, doubtful, open to interpretation, even inconsistent—if that causes you anxiety and distress, please bear with me. Eventually, I hope to allay your anxiety and ease your distress, but it may take a while—so please, bear with me.

Now, if you have a pew bible within reach, open to our second Scripture Lesson, the Gospel of Luke Chapter 24, verses 26-34. It's on page 89 in the New Testament, so start from the back of the Bible, since the New Testament begins again with page #1. I'll read the passage in a minute, but for now look at verse 34.

Verse 34 contains the first of Jesus' seven last "words" from the cross (in our Good Friday service this week we'll do all seven): "Father forgive them for they do not know what they do."

Do you see it? Good. Now, Do you see the double brackets around it, followed by a lower case "e"? OK now look down at your footnotes (right-hand side) for the lower case "e" and you find this, "some ancient authorities lack this sentence."

What does that mean? Well, it means that some ancient manuscripts have that sentence, while others don't. What gives?

Start here: We have no autographed copies of any book of the Bible, instead, what we have are copies of copies of copies of copies, etc.

Before computers with cut-and-paste, before photocopiers, before ditto machines, before the printing press, before all that, copies were made by hand—on animal skin or papyrus. And of course, as copyists copied, and as copies spread across the Mediterranean world and were copied again and again and again, through the centuries, discrepancies arose.

Now, don't panic: there's a whole field—called Paleography—devoted to studying manuscripts and how they were transmitted. It's a lot like doing genealogies, only of manuscripts not people. The Bible you hold in your hands is in part the result of the dedicated and inspired labor of centuries of paleographers.

So paleography 101: "lectio difficilior," that's Latin, literally "the more difficult reading," and in Paleography it means, "In general, **go** with the more difficult reading."

Think of it this way: You're reading a hand-written manuscript, and you come across a difficult word, one you don't know the meaning of. So you go to the dictionary—or somewhere—to discover its meaning. And when you do, you write the meaning—an easier word—in the margin beside, or even right above, the more difficult word.

Now suppose someone, years later, was copying—by hand—your copy. It's easy to imagine the copyist's eye being drawn to the easier word and then writing that word, and not the original, in his copy.

And if the copyist were a sleep-deprived monk, sitting in a cold library, who doesn't know Greek or Hebrew all that well, copying for nine hours a day, it's even easier to imagine. So, in the face of textual discrepancies, *lectio difficilior*; go with the more difficult reading, it's more likely to be closer to the original.

There's a whole lot more to paleography than just *lectio difficilior*. For example, there's an entire subfield called ***haplography*** that studies how the human eye skips words, and whole passages, based on the proximity of the same or similar words on the page.

Using these tools and many others, along with a developed understanding of how certain traits are transmitted through a particular manuscript lineage—again, think of it like a family tree—the paleographers can resolve many textual discrepancies with relative ease.

But there are harder ones: for those paleographers look for consistency—or inconsistencies—in vocabulary and syntax; also how the word or sentence fits—or doesn't fit—with the flow of the passage, even the overall themes of the chapter or book.

And then there are the really hard ones, like, say, Luke Chapter 23 verse 34: Some ancient and pretty reliable manuscripts have the sentence; some ancient and pretty reliable manuscripts don't. And as for consistencies and inconsistencies, fitting and not fitting?—well, arguments can be made both ways.

***These*** are the kinds of discrepancies that get noted in the footnotes, in the interest of full disclosure. Although even here there are gradations, as is the case with this sentence. The paleographic consensus is that a copyist *dropping* this sentence from the manuscript is a somewhat more likely than a copyist *adding* it. So it's fair to say that the sentence was *probably*—although by no means *certainly*—in Luke's original manuscript.

(If the paleographic consensus were the reverse, you would have only the little "e" in the text itself, and then the sentence would be in the footnotes, "other ancient authorities add the sentence. . .")

But even if a copyist did add the sentence—and it would be an interesting to ask where he got it—I still agree with Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown (whom I quoted at the top of your bulletins): if these words were added by a scribe, the scribe's insight would be an authentic interpretation of the Luke's understanding of Christ.

OK, so I have allayed your anxieties and eased your distress?

Hmmm... maybe not yet.

So, let's try this: God honors the best of our humanity by entrusting us with the care—the responsibility and the joy—of His Word. But God does not leave it at that; God does not abandon us with his word. Instead, God is with us as teacher and friend. “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

With that prayer in mind—that prayer that Jesus prays for us—listen for God's Word, Luke Chapter 23, verses 26-34:

As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

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.

The Word of the Lord.

### **Sermon**

So why would a copyist drop this sentence: Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing?

Because it was too difficult. Why was it too difficult?

Start here: who exactly is Jesus praying for? In other words, Who are the “they” who “do not know what *they* are doing”? Pontius Pilate, Herod, the chief priests, the scribes?—all of them seemed to know exactly what they were doing: crucifying an innocent man for their own expedience, without regard for truth or justice.

So again, Who are the “they” who “do not know what they are doing”? Herod's soldiers who mocked him? The crowd that chanted “Crucify him!”? The Roman soldiers who gambled for his clothes?—they knew what they were doing too: venting their contempt, indulging their blood lust, getting theirs. They all knew what they were doing, alright.

To say otherwise would be to . . . well, that would be to say that we are the “they” that does not know what we are doing, that we need forgiveness too. And that’s difficult: *lectio difficilior*.

Take Pontius Pilate for example. He knew that Jesus was innocent. In fact, he says so—publicly:

*“You brought me this man as one who was leading the people astray; and here I have examined him in your presence. I have found in this man no basis for the things you charge him with. He has done nothing to deserve death.”* (Luke 23:13-15)

Yes, Pilate knew he was innocent alright, and he sentenced him to death anyway—knowingly. And yet *did* Pilate really know? . . . did Pilate know that his name would be on the lips of by millions, hundreds of millions, billions of people:

*I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born  
of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified,*

for thousands of years, echoing down the corridors of time, until the end of time,  
“Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, suffered  
under Pontius Pilate, Pontius Pilate, Pontius Pilate . . .”

Did Pilate know ***that***?

The chief priests and scribes, the taunting crowds, and the mocking soldiers—they knew that he this Jesus of Nazareth, the putative prophet, the so-called King of the Jews. But did they know that he was

*the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true  
God, begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father; that through him all things were made.  
And that For us and for our salvation—for them and their salvation—  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.*

Truly human. Truly human. Truly human. For us and our salvation. That’s what he was. That’s who he was. Did the chief priests and scribes, the taunting crowds, and the mocking soldiers know ***that***?

Sin darkens the minds and divides the will. Sin separates us from God, and God’s creation, from other human beings and our own humanity. Sin diminishes us. It eats away at our humanity, destroys our being. Kills us eternally. And it looks like this:

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I can't do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want—that's what I do. I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to sin that dwells in me. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

That's Paul of course. From the seventh chapter of his Letter to Romans. There's no better statement of how sin darkens our minds and divides our wills, separates us from God, ourselves, and the world—than that.

Which is why Paul insists—and here he's in complete agreement with all the world's monotheistic religions as well as its greatest ethical teachers—that the worst possible punishment God can give us for our sin is . . . not to strike us down with lightening or to cast us into the outer darkness of perdition but to allow us to go on sinning.

Whatever worldly gains that sin may bring me—money, status, power, comfort, getting what I want (or at least what I think I want)—they cannot begin to compare to the losses—my estrangement from God, self, the world, and others that I suffer. And if, because I am in in the thrall of sin, sin has darkened my mind so much that I can't see that?

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Which is why when Jesus speaks to the women following him—the women who are beating their breasts and lamenting for him, those he calls “daughters of Jerusalem”:

*“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed. ‘Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us. ‘For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’”*

Which is why this is **NOT** a prophetic pronouncement of God's, inevitable, inexorable justice, a punishment that will one day be visited upon Jerusalem for crucifying Jesus. NO—this is Jesus' counter-lament, deeper and even more heartfelt than the women's for him.

It is this kind of suffering, this kind of death—when we wish that the mountains would fall on us us and the hills cover us—that sin brings with it in it in its train, that's what Jesus laments. Out of love for us.

And precisely because Jesus loves these women, loves his people, loves Jerusalem, loves the world, precisely because of that, as he hangs on the cross in his own agony, his crucifixion the very embodiment of our human sinfulness, precisely because of all that, Jesus lifts up his prayer:

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

Jesus practiced what he preached. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

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

Lectio difficilior. And also haplography. If a copyist did drop this sentence—if his eye did skip over it, as he moved from old manuscript to new and back again, I think he did so inadvertently, unconsciously. But not because the same or similar words were nearby on the page. No, it was because these words are difficult: they force us to acknowledge the possibility that we are not so different from those who crucified Jesus to acknowledge that we too, from of the blindness of our hearts, may fail to know the evil we do and its consequences.

*Father, forgive that copyist because he did not know what he was doing.*

And wouldn't it be nice if copyist's unconscious haplographic omission were the worst of our sins when it comes to the Bible?

But no, the Bible—I would guess almost every word of it—has been used to justify the worst sins: wars and crusades, chattel slavery and genocide, sexism, prejudice and hatred; exploitation, cruelty, inhumanity, meanness on on a cosmic and microcosmic scale.

Again to quote Raymond Brown: “too often **not** the absence of this prayer from the text, **but** the failure to incorporate it into one's heart has been the real problem.

OK, so NOW I have allayed your anxieties and eased your distress?

Hmmm... maybe not yet.

So Let's try this:

Even to this day: God honors the best of our humanity by entrusting us with the care—the responsibility and the joy—of His Word. But God does not leave it at that; God does not abandon us with his word. Instead, God is with us as teacher and friend.

I had this teacher—he's the one who taught me about lectio difficilior—he was an accomplished and renowned scholar, author of several books, he could read the Greek off the page like reading a shopping list in English. But what he liked to do best was teach beginning Greek.

There we would be, in class reading, translating each word one at a time . . . slowly . . . haltingly . . . hesitatingly (“ly” “ly” “ly” that means it's an adverb, right, and adverbs . . .

adverbs modify verbs right?), and yet he'd never lose patience. If we missed or mistranslated a word, he'd never say "No!" or "Wrong!" Instead, he'd just wait kindly, patiently, quietly, and then, if the silence continued, he'd say, "read that again, please." And then, if we still didn't get it, "That word . . . yes, that one . . . tell me about it."

"Well, i-it's a *noun*?"

"Look again."

But when we got something right, when we got on a roll, translating a half or even a whole sentence without stopping, without a mistake, when we correctly recognized an irregular aorist participle **as** an irregular aorist participle . He'd be like . . . "Good, good, good, very good! Very god! excellent!! keep going, keep going, yes! yes! yes! beautiful!! Well done!!!"

You would have thought we discovered penicillin. He did everything but break out the confetti and party horns.

**That's** the kind of teacher and friend God is—only infinitely more so. And so whatever the discrepancies in the text, whatever the differences between the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, we should see them for what they really are—teachable moments. God is there with us, in that moment, in the person of the Holy Spirit, so that we can begin to learn and live by God's Word.

How do we know that?

Because Jesus, the truly human one, God's Word made flesh, came to earth for the sake of us and our salvation, to forgive us for our sins and to free us from sin and death so that we might become truly human.

And how do we know that?

Because this same Jesus suffered and died on a cross for us, and as he was dying, he lifted up a prayer—**for us**. "Forgive them father for they do not know what they are doing."

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

