

**Good Friday  
(Mar. 21, 2008)**

**Father Forgive Them**

*When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and two criminals there also, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." – Luke 23:33-34*

Jesus came into our world for reconciliation. He came to heal the wounds of sin and division; to reconcile us to one another and to the Father. And there can be no reconciliation unless there is first forgiveness.

How often in the Gospels do we hear him speaking words of forgiveness or exhorting us to forgive? He forgave the paralytic. He forgave the penitent in the house of Simon the Pharisee. He forgave the woman taken in adultery. In the Sermon on the Mount he tells us, "Forgive and you will be forgiven," and he teaches us to pray in the words, "Forgive us as we forgive others." And in a most moving moment as he is dying on the cross, the first words he utters are words of forgiveness. "Father forgive them. They do not know what they are doing." It is a moment when he feels most vividly what it means to be a human being, his most vulnerable moment, the moment of his death. And in that vulnerability in his weakest moment after the scourging and the wounds, the crowning with thorns, his hands and feet pierced with nails, his first thought is to forgive the very people who had done these awful things to him.

Jesus had once said, "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate." We believe that the man who said that is the Son of God, himself the very word of God. This first word from the cross then is a word from God, and it tells us that the compassion of God is expressed in forgiveness. It is experienced in forgiveness as we too reach out to those whom we have hurt to ask their forgiveness or offer forgiveness to those who have hurt us.

We come here today and place ourselves before the cross. We look upon this wounded and dying man who we know is our Lord and our Savior. And as we pray today we cannot help but realize that this death was not simply a single incident that occurred two thousand years ago. The

Body of Christ is still with us. Indeed we are the Body of Christ and that Body is still suffering, is still dying.

We were all shocked a few months ago by the story of the killings in a small Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania when a deranged man wantonly shot several children and then killed himself. Some extraordinary stories of forgiveness have come out of that incident. Let me tell you about one that I recently heard and that you might be familiar with yourselves. An elderly Amish man had two granddaughters who were severely wounded in that schoolhouse. They were both hospitalized and were dying. He went to one hospital and held his granddaughter in his arms as she died. Then he went to another hospital and held the second child in his arms as she died. Then he went to the family of the man who had killed them and held them in his arms as he forgave them.

It's an extraordinary act, and it is what Jesus asks us all to do. As I recall this incident, and as I think of Jesus words, "Father, forgive them," I cannot help but think of those other words of Jesus that we all know so well, "Go, thou and do likewise."