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## INTRODUCTION

I once sat all night by the bedside of a dying monk. The effort he made to breathe was hard, the pain was great. In the early hours of the morning, as death seemed imminent, I noticed that he was struggling to speak. I approached as close as I could to catch his words, his last words. What was it he was trying to say? A message for his friends or his family? An anxiety in his mind, compounding the pain in his body? Slowly, and with difficulty, I heard the words, not always clearly, it is true. But I had yet to dwell on their meaning, understand the full import of what he said. I jotted them down on a piece of paper, and afterwards . . . after his death and burial, I began to think about these words and heard them through his voice, a message of love and hope.

I thought of Jesus—in agony from fear and apprehension in the garden the night before he died; in pain from the flogging he had received and the crown of thorns piercing the skin of his head; in anguish because he had been betrayed by Judas and

abandoned by close friends. And now, Good Friday, after the long and painful journey up the hill called Calvary, he was crucified. Dying a most cruel and agonizing death, he still had words to speak, his last words.

The last words of a dying person are precious indeed, and they are all the more so when that person is a cherished member of the family, one greatly loved and much respected. What is he trying to say? What is it that he is trying to convey, and what is the meaning of it? Sometimes it will be a word that speaks of his suffering and pain. At other times it will be a word of comfort, a last message to console, to be remembered and treasured. So the early Church remembered the last words of Jesus Christ, the ones he spoke as life ebbed away from him. The early Christians pondered on them, dwelt upon them, and down the ages men and women have sought, in their reflections and prayers, to find their deeper meaning. The early Christians had slowly begun to realize that this Jesus, whom they had known, was in fact the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One, for whom

they had waited for so long and whom they had so earnestly desired. But they came to see even more. This man, Jesus, the Messiah, was indeed truly God. That was a truth their minds could scarcely grasp. It was harder still when they had seen him so humiliated and so cruelly put to death. They had hoped for so much, and it had all ended in tragedy.

That sense of tragedy did not last, for the news that the tomb was empty, and the realization that death itself had not kept him captive, filled them with joy and gave them new hope.

The gospels recorded the incidents of his life, the things that he said and did, and this to instruct his followers and those who were to come after him, you and I among them. They wrote at length about his passion and death, for this had great significance for them. And they recorded his last words, the Seven Last Words. These were not just the words of a dying man, they were more. The human voice of the dying Christ was speaking to them of divine thoughts and attitudes, and as he died amid terrible suffering, these words were not only deeply moving and poignant

but very solemn. Each of these “last words” has the power to transform the lives of you and me, for they are the word of God. It is not possible to realize all the riches they contain. They reveal their secrets, slowly, if we meditate on them and pray. Let those words speak to you, and I will tell you what they have said to me.

# 1

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM; THEY DO NOT  
KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING.”



*Now with him they were also leading out two other criminals to be executed. When they reached the place called The Skull, they crucified him there and the two criminals also, one on the right, the other on the left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.”*

—Luke 23:32-34

**T***hey do not know what they are doing.*

They had scourged him, lacerating his body; they had put a crown of thorns on his head; they had insulted him, made fun of him. They were now nailing him to the cross. And yet, in what they were doing, the Roman soldiers were degrading themselves more than him. “They do not know what they are doing”—surely their very humanity should have prevented them from inflicting upon another what they could not have faced themselves. That man should be so cruel to man—it was so then, and it is often so in our own time: man’s inhumanity to man. “We do not know what we do”—that word is profound. The human voice of the Lord in his agony shows forth,

here a divine generosity that is surprising, and so very consoling. It is as if the Lord wants to go further than we could ever go to excuse us. He will find any reason to relieve us of the burden of guilt, if he can. Indeed, the Roman soldiers knew no better. Their training had made them ruthless and very cruel. Of course their actions are to be condemned: someone must be responsible and so be guilty, but these men . . . “they do not know what they are doing.” So he prays: “Father, forgive them . . .” Were there ever words so sweet to the ears of those burdened and weighed down by wrongdoing and sin?

In every human life there are things, actions, and attitudes that need forgiveness; there are memories of foolishness and weakness that lurk like dark specters to haunt us when the spirit is low or the going hard. If only we could hear, clearly and within us, that we have been forgiven. The Roman soldiers had not asked for forgiveness, and yet he asked that it should be given to them. If you and I truly want forgiveness, if our sorrow is real, what is it that stops us from knowing that we have been forgiven? Is it our

failure to believe in his love for us? He loved those Roman soldiers, though they did not know him. He would not have forgiven them if he had not loved them. If we turn to him, want to love him, and ask for forgiveness, we may be sure that our sorrow for the wrongs we may have done will bring us closer to him, and with closeness, peace of mind.

It is a heartwarming moment to experience forgiveness, to know again that I am loved even when I have strayed from God or done wrong. To forgive is a lovely quality in God. It is equally lovely among ourselves. When distressed by guilt or overcome with remorse, never for one moment doubt God's forgiveness. It is the faithful companion of our sorrow. And no matter what other people have done to us—the harm they have caused, the injustice they have inflicted, the ill will they have displayed—do not ever withhold your smile of forgiveness, even when they do not know what they do.



They drove nails  
through his hands,  
through his feet,  
to secure him on the cross.  
He had suffered  
the scourging,  
thorns battered into his head,  
insults,  
humiliations,  
taunting;  
now the pain  
in hands and feet  
as the nails tore through his flesh.  
The pain in his body  
accompanied now  
the agony of his mind,  
the agony that was his  
in the garden  
on the night before.

And yet he forgives,  
forgives them

for what they are doing,  
for the pain they are inflicting,  
desperate almost  
to find an excuse:  
“They know not what they are doing.”

Were they but obeying orders,  
doing what they were told  
by other men  
anxious to kill this prophet?  
Can these soldiers  
be excused  
for their part  
in so grievous a crime?  
He forgives,  
ignoring, so it would seem,  
the question that we ask.  
He forgives.  
“Forgive them, Father,  
for they know not what they do.”  
Thus he prays

those words of his, spoken  
not from weakness  
but from the strength of love  
which he has for us.  
There is a deeper truth  
for us to learn.  
It is that God seeks always  
to forgive;  
he will look for every reason  
to forgive,  
to make excuses for us,  
to understand.

Nonetheless he looks into our hearts  
to find “sorrow”  
or at least the beginnings of it.  
He expects us to be sorry,  
and to say so,  
to recognize the wrong  
we have done.

There is comfort in remembering that  
a humble and contrite heart  
he will not spurn.

Father, forgive me; I do not know what I do. I do not know what I have done. But, Lord, is that entirely so? Is there not within me that uneasy feeling in which a voice speaks, a voice difficult to hear now because so often unheeded, a voice that speaks a reproach?

That voice calls for a response by me; not a protest, not a curse, not a cry, but a prayer, one that pierces his heart so that love may flow from it—just one word: *Sorry*.

## 2

“INDEED, I PROMISE YOU, TODAY YOU  
WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.”

