

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 23:27–43

Sermon: “Beginning of the End”

Somebody, it would seem, messed up. The Holy Gospel we heard today seems better suited for Good Friday than today, the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

But this reading was selected because Good Friday is the beginning of the end. Good Friday is the lens through which we, as Christians, see everything. Everything before that day was leading up to it. Everything after that day is flowing from it. That was the day that changed the world. That day is the center of history.

So today on this Last Sunday of the Church Year, we consider the end through the lens of the cross—and our life leading up to the end through the lens of the cross. For Jesus’ death and life has something to say about our life and death.

So, today I want to focus your attention on just one little sentence from the Gospel, one little sentence Jesus spoke from the cross. You’ve heard it before, many times I’m sure.

But maybe today you can hear it a bit differently than when we hear it on Good Friday: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”** (v 34).

Usually when we hear that, we focus on what great love Jesus has that he could pray such words! And that's not wrong. We hear Jesus praying for the forgiveness of those who put him on the cross. Those who drove the nails through his hands and feet. Those who mocked him even as he prayed for them.

Those whose appetites would not be satisfied until they had taken his life. **“Father, forgive them. Make this forgiveness that I am here winning available for them.”** No small thing, that. For you know how hard forgiveness is, and for much lesser things than that. So how great and wondrous these words! And how precious for us sinners still today!

But it's that second part that I want to focus on: "***for they know not what they do.***" In context, as Jesus spoke those words, certainly the people who put him on the cross didn't know what they were doing. They didn't know that the hands they were driving nails through were the hands that had created all things and had even knit them together in their mother's wombs. They didn't know that the feet they had fastened to the cross were the feet that had walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day and would soon make the earth their footstool. They didn't know that the head into which they pressed that crown of thorns was the head of the One who knows all things. They didn't know. They didn't know that in this death was their life. They didn't know.

But we think we know. That's the problem. From Adam and Eve down to you and me today. We think we know. We think we know what we're doing. And therefore, we think we know what God should be doing.

Those who put Jesus on the cross thought they knew what they were doing: getting rid of a troublemaker and a blasphemer and someone who was going to bring the wrath of Rome down on their nation. And they thought they knew what God should be doing: that if Jesus really was God then he should jump down from the cross and save himself. And then those who believed in him, who believed that Jesus was who he said he was, the very Son of God in human flesh, probably were wondering: What in the world? Does God know what he's doing?

That question has often crossed the minds of God's people, because how often it seems to us as if he doesn't! We heard it again from the prophet Malachi today. The people were saying: We're doing what we're supposed to be doing, what God told us to do, mourning our sins and repenting and sacrificing, but what is it getting us? The arrogant are the ones who are blessed. Evildoers are the ones who are prospering.

They are putting God to the test with their sins and evil and perversion and getting away with it, nothing happens to them! Does God know what he's doing?

Because, after all, we know what God should be doing, right? He should be prospering us, blessing us, giving to us, helping us, making our life easy and punishing them! Does God know what he's doing? For evil keeps advancing. Does God know what he's doing? For I keep struggling. Does God know what he's doing? Because things don't seem to be getting any better.

But maybe Jesus was right. Maybe it's *we* who don't know what we're doing. . . .

For how often do things turn out differently than we expected? When what we thought would be good turned out bad? When what we thought would help actually hurt? When we thought we had everything planned out and then everything changed? And the other way too: when what we dreaded actually turned out well.

The truth is there's a lot more going on than meets the eye. God tells his people through the prophet Malachi: The day is coming. *Then* you will see what you do not now see.

But we want to see it all now. We want God to punish evildoers now. The problem is, if he did so, what would happen to you? You who hurt, you who lie, you who lust, you who doubt and disbelieve, you who covet and take, you who rebel, you who do not love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength all the time.

There's a lot more going on than meets the eye. Paul told the Colossians that Jesus is the creator of all things visible and invisible, as we also confess in the Creed. And there's a lot more invisible than you know. I tend to think of all that God is doing like an iceberg. The part of the iceberg we see floating on the water is only a small percentage, maybe ten percent, of the actual iceberg; most of it is hidden beneath the surface.

So, we, too, do not know all that God is doing, how he is working, what he is doing in the world, in our neighbor, and in us.

There's more going on than meets the eye. And especially is that true of the cross. For, yes, contrary to what the eye can see, this is no criminal! This man is the very Son of God, the Lamb of God, the atonement for our sins and the sin of the whole world. Though it doesn't look like it. Though it looks about as far from that as we can imagine. For, in fact, God does know what he's doing.

And the Day is coming when that will be seen. Malachi's *then*. The disciples saw it three days after the cross when Jesus rose from the dead. The before looked bleak. The after revealed the truth and the joy.

And so also for us on the Last Day it will be seen, and not before. Now, in this before time, we have words, we have promises, we have faith. Then it will be seen. But now, we say with the criminal hanging next to Jesus: Remember me! Remember me in my sad state. Remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And he does, for we know the tree of the cross that looked like defeat restores paradise. For now, ascended and in his kingdom, ruling all things for us and for our salvation, Jesus is remembering us and forgiving us and acting for us. And as he did to the thief next to him, telling us, too, “***You will be with me in Paradise***” (Luke 23:43).

When a child or an adult is baptized, Jesus is saying: “***You will be with me in Paradise***.” When we believe the Gospel and are absolved, Jesus is saying: “***You will be with me in Paradise***.” When we come to receive the body and blood of Jesus, he is saying: “***You will be with me in Paradise***.” Just as I came to be with you in your misery, so “***you will be with me in Paradise***.” And just as I died your death, so you, too, will awaken and arise with me into Paradise.

To the thief on the cross, Jesus said, “*Today*, you will be with me in Paradise.” When that *today* will be for you, when your soul will enter the nearer presence of God in Christ and your body will continue awaiting Christ’s coming.

I don't know how it will be but it will be a day of joy, when, as Paul said in our Epistle, you are "*delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*" (Colossians 1:13–14).

As we have him now, so we have his forgiveness now, and so we have that kingdom now, even if we cannot see all that now. For, in fact, God knows what he's doing. Always. Always working for our good. Always working that we hear those precious words: "*Father, forgive them.*"

Those were the words Jesus spoke from first to last, and the words he wants us to hear and to have, from the beginning of our life to the end. That on that Day, the Last Day, that Great and Final Day, the One who would not come down from the cross would pull us up from the grave and say: "Welcome home, my child! Welcome to Paradise."

Amen