

THEM

Texts on Good Friday
Luke 23: 32-38

March 21, 2008

"Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude".

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

In the words you have just heard, up to that perfect benediction, "Father, forgive them . . ." Luke the evangelist has more than a dozen times used the words, *they, them, their*. They fall like marching soldiers' feet: *they, them, their, them*. *They* kept demanding, the man *they* asked for, *they* led him away, *they* came to the place called *The Skull*, there *they* crucified him." Who are they?

We have our ready answers. "*They are the Jews*" was one sure response. For two thousand years, it has poisoned Christian hearts and minds, destroying the power of God's word in them who beat it into weapons of hatred and violence against Jews. *Father, forgive them*.

Is "them" the Roman military? Yes. Historians of the empire of Jesus' time have shown that the machinery and the motive for crucifixions lay with the Romans, not the religious. Like superpowers in every era, they applied gruesome acts of terrorism against the wretched in order to control a whole populace. Why, the likelihood is strong that when Luke and the others wrote their gospels, the little Christian churches felt such terror of Roman reprisal that they dared not denounce the empire for their founder's execution. Thus, moved by instincts for survival and definition, the early church instead accused the Jews with murder. *Father, forgive them*.

Them is us, the church? The comfortable and privileged? The empire? This strange answer begins to feel substantial: We crucified him. We crucify him. Each violence labored upon the body of each innocent in Darfur; in Guantanamo; in Haditha; in the east side of Buffalo. Each sure-for-certain rejection of the wretched and despised, the criminals, the prostitutes, the gays . . . *you* name it. Aren't there jumpy shouts of satisfaction each time we nail these people? Us, the nailers—and our fear and hatred the nails, since time began? *Father, forgive them . . . forgive us*, For we know not what we do? Is the enemy. . . us?

To see that can be profound, yet it is no place to stop climbing for a better view. The story this Good Friday is not first of all about us or them. The story is about the Lord, the One who sees “them.” How does he see them? How does he see us? Forgiven in the Father, yes—but how? For so very long, you were told—mistold—that they, or you, or we, are forgiven “in his blood,” meaning that the wrath of God, hurtling like a spear at your ever-sinful soul was diverted from the intended victim to bloody the body of the Son so that you might be spared. This is a terrible doctrine, a doctrine of terror. Its god is a terrorist, its devotees bound to be terrorists like their father. This Good Friday story is not about such a lord, an overlord, whose awful like is known in every land and cast-down people since man began. No, this story is about the One who sees them forgiven. How does he see?

In spite of all the stories that have risen around him, we mustn't suppose that Jesus faces his crucifixion knowing that the bad part will soon be over, the way you and I greet the dentist, knowing this is going to hurt, but we should be feeling better . . . by Sunday morning. No, Jesus wouldn't be fully human if he saw the future with x-ray vision. What he sees is: *They have not got hold of me. Yes, my hand they strike and my feet. My blood pours out. But not I. There is that in me from God my Father whom no thing and no one can harm, no nail hold, no spear spend, no hatred or fear defile. Made things can be mangled and maimed, but I am begotten, not made. They have not touched me. Though in their thoughts, that is what they suppose they are doing, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing. So confused, so violent, so afraid—they squander their birthright of liberty and justice in terror and warfare. But your Word, from the beginning, now in flesh appearing— your living Word they touch not.* That is how he sees.

You've seen yourself walk down this path, at least a little. But like a little mustard seed of faith, in little life begins. You have had a longing; it was dashed all at once, or maybe a hundred times. Yet there are times when you know that you and that longing are not the same thing. You are free. Or someone you love and have loved has become to you the far side of the moon, cold and unseen, and the chill sets in your own bones. Yet come moments you know these bones can live, they live, apart from every earthly frame. As if in a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, you live. Your face, your ear, your eye have

felt/heard/seen the shame of spitting, as Isaiah calls it: the hideous hatreds that haunt this nation as race fear and religious fear. Yet here for seven seconds—was seven seconds a seed too little to thank your God for?—you knew you flew free of every wind of evil sent pitilessly your way.

Whenever in the grace of God you see this (*remember: you can't make another see it, so never hasten or force it*); whenever you see your self liberated from the bonds and bars of time and fear, two things alight like doves in your soul: One: You also are begotten, not made; "born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh, but of God." That is why the Lord calls you sister, brother, life without end. Two: You see "them" as they really are. Who are they who have poised the nail and drawn the hammer? "They are not utterly apart from me," you see—and you see this not because they and we are sinners all, but because they and we are free, or will be, if they see what you see. Have they not yet seen this birthright of liberty and justice? O Lord, may our word and our work be light that they may see. Father, forgive them, even as you have forgiven me to see.

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