THE SIGN OF FORGIVENESS


One of the strange, mysterious marks of the Church of the twentieth century is the fact that between Ash Wednesday and Easter morning there will be more people in the churches of Christendom than at any other time of the year. In order to understand this more clearly it becomes necessary to examine these crowds more closely. Essentially there are three groups in our churches during the Lenten season of Lent. First, there are those who will be there also in July and August—the steady, quiet saints who are the glory of the Kingdom of God on earth. Secondly, there are those who are in church during Lent by custom and tradition. They have learned from their childhood that this is a good time to be in church. Actually it does not mean very much except that they catch a glimpse of the faith of their childhood. Third, there are those who are somehow haunted by the gallant figure of the lonely sufferer on the cross. Their minds, cut by the acids of modernity, have succumbed to a vague, uneasy feeling that He knew something which life and time have taken away from the world. They see in Him a relentless strength, a far hope and a continuing dream of goodness which the modern world has so largely forgotten. All these people, however, have a common purpose. They have come to see a man die. There is a strange fascination about this. Death is the one universal and inevitable experience. Further, the human race has discovered that we can learn how to live by practice. Each experience, whether it be happy or tragic, will, if we are wise, teach us something about the next. For the supreme experience of death, however, life furnishes no
rehearsal. We can learn only by walking to the last door with someone else, by listening to their dying words, and carrying them in remembering hearts for the day when we, too, shall join the majority of the wise and the silent.

We, too, have come to this church to see a man die. Even humanly speaking He is one of the great figures of life and history. Even the most hardened unbeliever will admit that He changed the course of history. His dying words, therefore, must be tremendously and enormously important.

Seven times He spoke, three times to men and three times to God, and once to Himself.

The first word from the Cross—"Father, forgive them for they knew not what they do"—is totally unexpected. He says nothing about Himself. Like lightning our Lord's first words strike straight into the heart of all the tragedy of mankind.

The face under the crown of thorns goes up. The marching years become the accompaniment of His words, and the crowd around the Cross is transformed into the human race. The world hears a dying man point to the reason for death:

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Surely this is no sudden thought without a long background and without a profound cause. This word reaches far back beyond the centuries into the quiet unbroken calm of eternity where there was only God. It reaches back into the council of the Holy Trinity where there was the vision of the Cross against the darkened sky and the far silhouette of those torn and tireless arms. It reaches back into the garden in the cool of the day when Adam and Eve were hiding from the voice of God after the fall into sin. It reaches back into all the prophets and kings who had said something about this dying man on the Cross. It reflects the quiet night when there was a Child born in a stable at Bethlehem. It reminds us of the words of our Apostolic Creed, "born of the Virgin Mary"—suffered under
Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

This now was the fulfillment of all these events. It was Friday noon, and a crowd poured out of the Damascus gate. This was the climax of the drama of redemption. Now God could do no more. His infinite love for mankind was now reflected most clearly in the person, the work, and the words of His only-begotten Son dying on the cross. This first word is, therefore, for all our yesterdays and all our tomorrows. It is not only for those who are standing there but for all men who have lived and will live. It picks up all the years and rolls them up to heaven for the forgiveness of our heavenly Father.

There are few words in Holy Writ which more clearly point to the tremendous, dark, and tragic fact of sin. It is necessary for us today to stay with this thought for a moment. There are some things we can do about sin. We can be sorry for it. We can regret it. We can weep over it. We can offer to make reparation when our sin has struck someone else. There is, however, one thing we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot forgive it. Someone has to go the long rest of the way. There must be a voice from the cross against the long silence of eternity, over the noise of two thousand years, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

"For they know now what they do!" We have all heard the agonized question:

What is really wrong with the world and the human race? Here is the great answer--moral stupidity! There is a stupidity of the mind and a stupidity of the soul, and nothing in the world is more terribly fatal. After all, who crucified Jesus Christ? Men too blind to see who He was, too dull to hear the truth, too stupid to care about goodness and holiness and truth. How often has every faithful pastor heard the words, usually spoken in bitter tears; If I had only known--what would happen with that careless word of mine, with my turning away from my friend, with my momentary anger or passion. If I had only known--this is often the moral
epitaph over a situation which cannot be remedied by human beings.

And yet the tremendous, mysterious thing about this prayer is that it points to this moral stupidity as a basis for our Lord's plea for our forgiveness. "They know not what they do." They think that they are wise, intelligent and shrewd—but, my heavenly Father, they are children. They are bad and wicked children. They do not know what their deeds finally lead. They do not have the imagination; they do not have the moral insight. Let it be said again, as it has been said these many hundreds of years, that sin is always unintelligent, stupid and foolish. It always ends in the ashes of burned out fires and the gray dust of shame. All this is no far away story or a lost and broken dream. This is the past, the present and the future, forgiveness of the Cross. This is the past, present and future sign of the forgiveness of the Cross. Certainly all of us need this as we need nothing else. We have brought memories into this church of our own sins over the years. These memories burn. There are things that we should like to forget. The great, holy and blessed thing about the sign of forgiveness is that a preacher can now stand up and give you this forgetfulness. There can be a drying of our tears over our sins. There can be relief from the tearing pain in our hearts. There can be a return to heaven and hope. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." We may be children crying in the night, stupid, willful and wrong, but we are still His children. By His grace we can now promise that we will try to do better. We can come to His cross in penitence and faith. If we do that, suddenly He is high and lifted up; and the age-old beautiful story of the prodigal son is re-enacted again and again in this church and all over the world.

When that happens by the grace and mercy of God, then there is also a second lesson we can learn from this word. Every day we pray "Forgive us our trespasses and as we forgive those who trespass against us." No amount of
twisting and turning can get away from this fact: We are asking for forgiveness in the measure in which we are ready to forgive, no more and no less. We are trying our life to the life of God in Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, completely wrong to say, "I can forgive but I cannot forget." By the grace of God we can do what God has done for us. We can also forget. He has forgotten our sins. He has buried them in the bottom of the sea of His eternal pity. So we are to act in our realm, in our little life, as God acts in all life and history. Even though our time is so short and our together so brief, we must find time to forgive and forget the trespasses and sins of others. There is no sense in staggering toward eternity with a heavy burden of grudges and hurts and jealousy and hate and malice. "Forgive us--as we forgive!" This is the one of the great signs of the Cross. This is God's way of doing things. It is the way of incredible power. It reflects a love that will not let go. It shows us again a love which bears all things for us. Finally, there is no way in which the human heart can ignore this basic lesson of the Cross. It is true, of course, that sometimes men do not see the divine way, the way of forgiveness, of love and gentleness and humility. They feel that there are better ways of solving the deep and dark problems of the human heart. It is, therefore, necessary also for our generation to turn again and again to the sign of the Cross. This way is always up. It leads finally beyond the flaming ramparts of our world to a world where there will be no need of forgiveness and where we shall finally know by His grace and mercy what we are doing. We shall see very clearly that the ultimate power lies not in hate and fear and force but in forgiveness and love and grace. This is the Sign of the Cross.