[**Jeremiah 23:1-6**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=290#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 46**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=290#psalm_oth_reading)

[**Colossians 1:11-20**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=290#epistle_reading)

[**Luke 23:33-43**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=290#gospel_reading)

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Summary: “to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind”

If you read through the four gospel accounts, you'll discover than Jesus is recorded as having said seven different things from the cross.

“*Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.”*

“*Woman, behold thy son.” And to the disciple, “Behold thy mother.”*

“*Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.”*

“*My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?”*

“*I thirst.”*

“*It is finished.”*

“*Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”*

These are the so-called seven words from the cross.

Of these seven, three of them are unique to the gospel of Luke. They do not appear in Matthew, Mark or John. The three found only in Luke are:

“*Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.”*(23: 34)

“*Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.”*(23:43)

“*Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”*(23: 46)

It's interesting to think about why these words are recorded only by Luke. We know, of course, that Luke was not an eyewitness to the event; anymore than Mark and probably Matthew were, so what he tells us about it must have come from someone else who was present. Who was that person? We'll never know for sure, but it's pretty safe to say that it would have been someone standing close to the cross, close enough to hear things that the witnesses on whom the other gospel writers relied could not hear.

Some people have speculated that it might have been the centurion, the one Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention as having been deeply affected by the way Christ died. Others have suggested that it might have been Saint Paul. We know from elsewhere that Paul had spent considerable time in Jerusalem studying under a great Rabbinical scholar, so he might very well have been there when Jesus was tried and crucified. We know for certain that he was present at the stoning of Saint Stephen, which happened not that long after the crucifixion. Perhaps he was there as a witness, and perhaps that experience prepared him at some deep and unconscious level for the great conversion experience that happened to him later on the road to Damascus.

But my own favorite speculation is that it might have been Simon, the fellow from the north of Africa whom the Roman soldiers dragooned from the crowd to help Jesus carry the cross up to Golgatha. Luke is also the only gospel writer to include that detail, and we have good reason to believe that this Simon and two of his children went on to become important figures in the early church. It is certainly not difficult to imagine that this man, who was probably in Jerusalem just as a Passover tourist, might have carried that cross to the place of crucifixion, and remained there while the young preacher from Galilee was nailed to the cross, and stayed nearby as the terrible events of the next few hours ran their course.

As I said, we'll never know if he was the one who heard Jesus speak from the cross, and in later years communicated what he heard to Luke. But we know somebody did, and it is thanks to that person that we have a full record of these extraordinary remarks that Jesus, the man-God, uttered in quiet words with his dying breaths.

We dwon’t have time today to talk about all of them, so what we’ll do for not is just focus on the first:

“*Father, forgive them;”*he said *“they know not what they do.”*

For the first few centuries of Christian history, the writers and theologians of the church argued that when Jesus uttered those words, he must have been forgiving the Roman soldiers who were executing him, rather than the Jews of Jerusalem, who were the moving force behind that execution. That must be the case, they thought, because forty or so years after the crucifixion, Jerusalem was overrun by the Roman armies, and large parts of the city destroyed. If Jesus, and therefore God, had forgiven the Jews, the argument went, then surely the city would not have been destroyed. Therefore, he must have been forgiving the Roman soldiers.

Many people today would say the same thing, but my view is that it is not just the Roman soldiers that Jesus is forgiving, but also not just the Jews, but rather the soldiers and the Jews and everyone else, and for the same crucial reason, the reason Jesus himself gives: “they know not what they do.”

In the 8th chapter of John's gospel, John records Jesus saying this: *and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*In John's 14th chapter, he records Jesus saying: *I am the way, the truth, and the life.*

What Jesus is teaching us, I believe, and what is the very, very hardest part of his teaching to accept, is that human failure in the realm of the spirit is due to ignorance, to a lack of knowledge of the truth.

We can all testify, I think, to an exceptionally deep temptation to criticize, to find fault with others. Whether it's our in-laws or our unfriendly neighbors or the car salesman or the lazy bums on welfare or the baby-killing abortionists or the masked antifa thugs or the vulture capitalists or the power hungry Democrats or the bad orange man or the Nazis or the Communists or the Islamists or the M-13 gangs or the people who shoot up schools or the cheaters on workman's compensation or the bullies in school or the blankety-blank guy tailgaiting you or the unfriendly neighbor or our in-laws...in all these cases and countless more, we find in others, not just shortcomings, but faults, moral faults, something we can feel justified in blaming them for. In ninety-nine percent of the cases, we have no tendency whatsoever to attribute their behavior to ignorance. Ignorance is too...innocent. We want to blame, not to excuse.

And that's why I say that this particular teaching is so hard, for all of us.

Of course, the ignorance, the lack of knowledge, that Jesus is talking about is not what we normally understand by ignorance. It's not a lack of information or a lack of instruction. When Jesus says that knowing the truth will set you free, he's not talking about the truths of geometry or economics or auto mechanics. He says, *I am the truth.*It's the knowledge of *him*that sets us free. And it's not information about him, but knowledge *of* him, it's knowing him.

But what is this, this *knowing*him?

I wish I could tell you. I wish I could speak from experience and tell you what it's like to truly *know* Jesus. But I find the same spirit of criticism and blame and condemnation in my own heart, and what that means is that I haven't found that freedom, that perfect freedom from bitterness and indignation and self-righteous anger that Jesus offers as its reward. Heaven, I suspect, is the place where we will really begin to know Jesus, and if what Jesus has told us is true, then in heaven we will know the truth, and that acquaintance will liberate us from the bitterness and bile of unforgiveness. But in the meantime, we still remain under the instruction, to try to treat the misbehavior of others the way we treat the failures of children, as products of ignorance.

This church adheres to and teaches a doctrine of Christian universalism, meaning we do not believe in a hell of eternal damnation, that we do believe that everyone … everyone, past, present and future … has been reconciled to God in and through Jesus Christ.

When I talk with people who are seriously interested in this point of view, the concern that arises again and again is that it violates our most deeply held feelings about justice. The question is always some variation of the following: Are you really saying that X gets into heaven? And for X you can substitute Hitler or the abortionist or Bin Laden or Jack the Ripper or the Bad Orange Man or your sister-in-law or that blankety-blank driving at fifty miles per hour five feet behind your fender. Surely these people can't get off scot free. Surely they must pay the scot, pay the tax, pay the price for the harm they have done.

Even among Christian universalists, the tug of this conviction is so strong that many of them imagine heaven must have some punitive mechanism like purgatory, so that the wrong-doers still have to suffer for their misdeeds. The difference from hell, though, is that their suffering is not eternal, and the suffering is rehabilitative rather than simply punitive.

We'll all find out someday, of course, but for the here and now, I myself am led by my understanding of the words of Christ to the position that the remedy for what we call evil, however egregious, is not punishment, whether finite or infinite, whether permanent or temporary, but rather a personal and familiar relationship with the truth.

In the 4th chapter of his gospel, Luke records the very first episode of Christ's entire ministry. He tells us how Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth and attended the Sabbath service at the local synagogue. At the service, he requested the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and after he had unrolled it to the proper place, he read the following:

[**18**](http://biblehub.com/luke/4-18.htm)“The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to *the* poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to *the* captives  
And recovery of sight to *the* blind,  
*To* set at liberty those who are oppressed;  
[**19**](http://biblehub.com/luke/4-19.htm)To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (quoting Is 61: 1)

And then Jesus closed the scroll, looked around at the others in the synagogue, and told them that this prophecy had now been fulfilled in him.

The blindness that he came to heal was the blindness of ignorance; the liberty he proclaimed is the freedom from the ignorant delusion that darkness is actually light, that death is actually life, that there is any road to heaven except the road of truth, which is Christ himself.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, Lord, is that you cure us of blindness, to the extent that can be accomplished within this mortal coil. Help us to see evil for what it is, just ignorance of You. Help us to pity rather than hate those who go astray. Help us to recognize the ignorance in ourselves, the ignorance that leads us to hate our enemies rather than their own blindness. Help us to see the world with boundless sympathy and unending mercy, the way Jesus sees it, and we ask this in his name.