

## **GOOD FRIDAY East Calder Church 18<sup>th</sup> April 2014**

**Call to worship: Isaiah 53 : 4 – 7**

**Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth, he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.**

### **Reflecting on God's Word**

Reading: Luke 23 : 26 - 34

#### **Reflection : "Father forgive them"**

Come and see, come and see. Many did come and see that day. They came to witness the pathetic, undignified death of the travelling preacher, the man who associated with the unclean and the sinners and the prostitutes and the outsiders, the man who had been tried and found guilty by the learned priests and Jewish leaders, a liar and a blasphemer, a king without an army.

As Jesus looked down from the cross, what did he see?

People who loved him and people who hated him

People who revered him and people who feared him

People who had kissed him and people who had flogged him

People who had cheered Hosanna and people who had cried "Crucify him!" And some who had done both.

He must have thought "I am doing this for all of them."

As well as the physical agony, he must have felt betrayed and lonely and in despair and disappointed. But he did not rage at them, he did not call down curses on their heads, he did not threaten or rebuke, he just said "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

And this is the meaning of the cross, the central focus, the reason for Jesus' sacrifice. We receive forgiveness for our sins at the cross through the Saviour who was made sin for us.

And of course Jesus set us the ultimate example of how we should forgive one another. If Jesus could forgive those who had betrayed him and beaten him and humiliated him and crucified him, who were putting him to death, a slow agonizing death, if he could forgive them then surely we must try to be forgiving too.

Remember Jesus had told the story of the unforgiving servant. The servant owed the master money which he could not repay but the master was forgiving and compassionate and forgave the man. When another man owed the servant a small sum of money, he was

unforgiving and had the man thrown into prison. The master heard about this and had his servant thrown into prison for being unforgiving when he himself had been forgiven much.

If we want to receive the forgiveness that Jesus freely to us on the cross then we need to have forgiving hearts for others.

I watched Songs of Praise last Sunday and I was very moved by the testimony of a remarkable young man. Ben Mussanzi was travelling to a funeral in his native Congo in 1981. He was attacked by around 30 young men who were armed. They thought that he was from a different ethnic group and they decided to kill him – although they were mistaken because he was of same ethnic group as the young men. They decided not to kill him with their machettes but to throw him off a bridge into a river so that it would like he drowned. They pulled off his shirt and began to tie his arms behind his back. He shouted out “I’m ready to die but let me pray before you kill me!” He said that the Holy Spirit brought all the men to father round him as he prayed and he said “Lord thank you for planning that I will be killed today by my own race but forgive them.” He then said “Okay, I’m ready, you can kill me now.” He lost consciousness and when he came too the young men were fighting amongst themselves and blaming each other for trying to kill him, some were pulling him from the mud and others were trying to put his shirt back on. Lord, forgive them. What courage this young man had when

facing death.

For most of us, we will be called to forgive others in less dramatic circumstances, in more ordinary situations – but it can still be hard for us.

I was speaking to a young man last Friday who fallen out with his father-in-law last summer. They had said some insensitive things to each other, they had then been stubborn and dug in their heels and things got worse between them. The young man did try to reach out to his father-in-law earlier this year but the olive branch was rejected, more negative things were said, it was worse than ever. This break down caused tension and anxiety for the young man's wife and his mother-in-law and his children. But God was at work because the young man told me that his minister had preached on forgiveness and he knew that he had to forgive his father-in-law. His spirit was troubled and he could not find any peace. He said, however, that he had tried to forgive already and it had not been accepted and he was worried about another rejection. I reminded him that Jesus said that we should forgive those who sin against us not once, not seven times but seventy times seven times, in other words, keep on forgiving (Matthew 18). The young man said he knew that because that was what his minister had preached on! The next morning I received a text message from him which just said in block capitals RECONCILIATION! He had gone into his father-in-law's house and said

he was sorry for the wrong things he had said and he forgave his father-in-law for the wrong things he had said.....and then the father-in-law said the same and they were both emotional and they shook hands three times. The older man told the younger man that he greatly respected him for coming to him. The younger man said that God had given him the strength to do so and the older man, who is not a Christian, saw the forgiving power of God at work.

Unforgiveness eats away at us, makes us bitter and hardens our hearts. Some people are hard to forgive, some hurts are hard to forgive, forgiveness does not always happen instantly, the first time we utter the words, forgiveness can be a journey, a journey in which we need to keep forgiving over and over again.

If we cultivate a forgiving spirit within us then the rewards will be great, we will come to know a fuller measure of the fruit of the spirit –love and peace and kindness and gentleness towards others, goodness and faithfulness and self control and .....like the young man who sent the text of reconciliation, abundant joy.

Reading :                Luke 23 : 35 – 43

**Reflection : “Today you will be with me in paradise”**

The two thieves on the crosses, one either side of Jesus, had much in common. They were both criminals. They were both suffering the

agony of crucifixion. They could both see Jesus hanging on the cross.

They could see the sign above his head, King of the Jews. They had heard Jesus say, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Both want desperately to be saved from death.

But their reactions to Jesus are completely different.

The first thief says "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

It does not matter to him that he has sinned and is being fairly punished.

He is not sorry for what he has done, maybe just sorry he was caught, his only aim is to save himself. He might have been aware of Jesus' healings

and miracles, heard about him raising someone from the dead. He

might even believe that he is the Messiah – but he has not had a

spiritual awakening, he is not coming to Jesus humbly and in

repentance, with love and respect and thankfulness. No, he turns to

Jesus because it is convenient, he has nothing to lose, he wants to

receive from Jesus but he has nothing to give.

Many people are like the first thief, they enjoy all the pleasures of their

worldly life and have no need of God – until something goes wrong and

then they call out to God, God why are you letting this happen, God get me out of this mess.

One writer talks about the old car-jack theology. A car jack is a dirty, useless thing that we keep out of sight in the boot of the car until we get a flat tyre (a little suffering). Then we get it out of the boot, let it do the dirty work and then put it away again. “If you’re such a good jack, jack me down off this cross Jesus.” “If you’re such a good jack, jack me out of this sickness, out of this financial mess, out of this dead end job, out of this miserable relationship.”

The thief was not sorry or broken or humble or sincere. The thief perhaps saw that Jesus had the power to save him but he was not a king to be followed. Jesus did not respond, there are no recorded words of Jesus to this thief. When he turned his head to speak to the second thief, he must have turned completely away from the first man.

I was reminded of the verse in Matthew 7 where Jesus said that “not everyone who says to me Lord Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only he who does the will of the Father who is in heaven.”

But Jesus does hear the words of the second thief. This is the thief that Luke wants us to be like. He might be the very first Christian convert, surely the first to enter paradise with the Lord. He is the model follower of Christ –

1. He is not influenced and drawn in by the words of the first man
2. He feared God, he was in genuine awe of God
3. He admitted that he had done bad things, he was a sinner
4. He acknowledged that he deserved to be punished, it was just
5. He acknowledged that Jesus had done nothing wrong, he was a righteous man
6. He acknowledges that Jesus is a king
7. He pleads for Jesus' help

The complete theology of sin, repentance, forgiveness, worship and salvation summed up in two verses in the words of a criminal.

And Jesus was impressed. He had to respond. How much effort did that response take? He had been hanging in agony for hours, pain seared through every part of his body, each breath was agony, his mouth was



dry and caked in blood and dirt. But still he answered "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

For Jesus it was so important that he spoke these words of eternal life to the dying sinner so that at the eleventh hour the man knew that he was saved. It was important too that those standing near also heard so that these words would eventually be recorded and passed down the generations.

Can we come to Jesus today like the repentant thief?

Can we look on the face of Jesus on the cross,

the cross of blood and sweat and tears,

the cross where sorrow and joy flow mingled down,

the tree on Calvary which leads us to the tree of life which is in the

paradise of God.

Can we hear Jesus whisper "You are forgiven. You will be with me today." Such love, weeps for the shame I know

Such love paying the debt I owe

O Jesus, such love