

Episode: The First Word: “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.”

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In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

The custom of meditating on these Seven Last Words of Jesus on the cross is a relatively recent vintage. The format we know today, with seven structured meditations, really took shape in Catholic devotion during the 16th century. It became a common Good Friday practice, focusing on seven key moments during those agonizing three hours of the Lord's hanging on the cross. Two of the words are "I thirst," and "It is finished." This meditation is about the first of the Seven Last Words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Our first thought, no doubt, focuses on the religious authorities who had fought so hard to bring about the Lord's death. But it is far too easy to stop there, shaking our heads at the thought that they did not realize who it was they were crucifying. In fact, those words of Jesus, "they know not what they do," need to wound us in our innermost being. We too know not what we do. We can blithely offend God without giving it any thought, remaining oblivious to the impact of our sins on our Creator. St. Josemaria underscores the danger of superficiality in *Furrow*, point 993. He writes, "In our meditation, the Passion of Christ comes out of its cold historical frame and stops being a pious consideration presenting itself before our eyes as terrible, brutal, savage, bloody... yet full of love. —And we feel that sin cannot be regarded as just a trivial error: to sin is to crucify the Son of God, to tear his hands and feet with hammer blows and to make his heart break." We have to be aware of what we are doing, so much is at stake. It would be tragic to go about our moral life without giving a thought to God's point of view.

In this context, sincerity with ourselves is absolutely crucial, calling a spade a spade. It is easier than we think to lack this kind of sincerity with ourselves. As one writer put it, "We each have an infinite capacity for self-deception." Pope Gregory the Great, writing in the sixth century, warned about the danger of self-deception. He was keenly aware that we naturally deceive ourselves about our motives and virtues. We are often the last to see our own faults clearly. This is why he emphasized the need for rigorous, honest, self-scrutiny. There are countless ways we rationalize and hide from uncomfortable truths about ourselves. A physician was administering an annual checkup for a patient. He asked the patient, do you drink alcohol? The response, no, I don't drink alcohol. I just drink beer and wine. A person could easily insist I am a loving person while at the same time sowing dissension and resentment all around them. A man considers

himself courageous without ever having his courage challenged. Another person might be proud of her patience until she is actually provoked. Sometimes we can be blinded to more serious sin.

Take the case of King David, the beloved friend of the Lord. After committing the grave sin of adultery with Bathsheba and arranging for the death of her husband, David was visited by the prophet Nathan. David's evident blindness to the enormity of his sin is truly breath taking. Only when Nathan accused the king directly did David finally come to his senses and recognize his sinfulness. An important element in our moral growth is learning from the mistakes of those who have gone before us. By reading Sacred Scripture, we acquire a moral vocabulary. The experience of King David teaches us the importance of guarding our senses. The horrendous fratricide of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain shows us how much damage envy can cause. Our moral formation is also critical. Without clear ideas, chaos can easily ensue.

Take, for example, the following episode that occurred at a well-known Catholic university. One Friday night, a student who was quite drunk, got behind the wheel of his car, veered off the road on to the sidewalk and killed another student. A week later, the University chaplain, who was still recovering from the trauma of the accident, assembled the students in one of the dormitories and asked them a very fundamental question, Is it a sin to get drunk? The students looked bewildered and answered no. The chaplain, who could not believe his ears, said in a very pained and strong voice, it is.

The following story is guaranteed to leave you with your head spinning. An educator had a conversation with a college student, someone with whom he had had many conversations over the years. The young man was speaking about his new girlfriend and how great their relationship was. The teacher asked him if the relationship was physical. He said it was not. Suspicious, the teacher asked him if it was sexual. He said it wasn't. Still suspicious, he asked him if he and his girlfriend were having sex. He said that they had had sex a few times in the six months they had been seeing each other, but then he exclaimed that it was not all they did when they were together, as if to clarify the nature of the relationship. Incredibly- it became clear that the student believed that you can have sex in a dating relationship as often as you want and as long as you do other things as well, such as going for walks, the relationship should not be described as sexual.

So where do we go from here? King David teaches us a lesson that can guide us during this Lent, that is the value of contrition. Once King David had come to his senses and recognized his sin, he performed serious penance and made deep acts of contrition. He later composed Psalm 50, which includes the phrase, "a contrite and humble heart, O God, you will not despise."

Perhaps these words of Dietrich von Hildebrand can help prepare us to have the best Lent ever, "Contrition arouses us from the sleep of unspiritual existence, from what might be called a mere living away. Contrition awakens us to a keen consciousness of the things that ultimately matter, that is the metaphysical situation of man, considered in its full gravity, our status under God's law and our character as confronted with him, the task and the responsibility imposed on us by God, the importance of our earthly life for our eternal destiny."

That is a very dense paragraph, but a very important one. The first place, contrition wakes us up, helps us to come to our senses instead of simply merely existing. It helps us to realize and be aware of the things that really matter. It helps us to face up to the importance of the way we live our life for our earthly destiny. Von Hildebrand goes on to say, "It is in contrition that we respond to the infinite holiness of our absolute Lord, the eternal judge, whose judgment we cannot evade."

Mary, we shudder at the thought that we could approach Lent in a casual way, simply resolving to give up chocolates, or, if we are in a playful mood, deciding to forego losing at tennis. Those sacrifices are fine, but we want the real thing, a genuine conversion, shaking off any tendency to take sin lightly and to leave God's point of view out of the picture. Mary, my mother, obtain for us that contrite and humble heart that Our Father God will not despise.

I thank you, my God for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you.