

## **The First Words: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do...”**

“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do”...These stark words are the first words spoken by Christ at his crucifixion.

For me, these words challenge us to explore who we are as sinners, what does salvation mean, and the mysteries of the holy trinity. Christ does not address the crowds before him, he addresses his Father in heaven. It is not Jesus alone, nor God the Father who forgives us. And who are “them”? I think it is pretty common to take the broader view of “them” to be understood as all of humanity, with the idea that we are the reason that Christ dies on the cross. But let’s look at the people surrounding the cross that day. There were those who dragged him there, those who beat him, those who stood by and did nothing, those who could have claimed they were just carrying out justice after a fair trial, and perhaps even there were some onlookers who really had no idea what was happening - as we now know executions were quite common in these times. So what is it that WE seek forgiveness from, what kind of forgiveness, what kind of salvation do we need? What have we done?

While these are some of the questions I will reflect on today, luckily for me, I don’t intend to answer those questions right now. Rather, as this is more of a reflection, I would like to explore the idea of forgiveness very broadly in my own day-to-day experiences.

What does forgiveness mean? As some of you may know, when I am not here on Sundays I work in the world of television, making documentaries. There are many interesting stories and characters I come across, and in the last six months, much of my focus has been on the Mississippi river. Since August I have had the opportunity to spend several weeks on the river, filming with workers on barges, disaster relief folks, dredgers and general repair workers.

This is a hard world to step into. For those who have not traveled on ships at sea, or worked on the water, you, like I would not understand this other world that’s out there. In my travels on the Mississippi, the folks I’ve encountered have been very interesting, complex people.

In my experience, the workers of the river have either abandoned or been abandoned by society - Workers who leave their homes, rarely see their families, and work for little money so that the grains, and oil and products we need to live our lives reach grocery stores, supermarket shelves and gas stations. These folks literally live on the river.

The river itself is unforgiving. The currents, the extreme hots and colds. Flooding, draining, constantly moving - It’s a world where life means being either in a

harsh wasteland or so close to bustling, exciting cities like St. Louis, Memphis, and of course New Orleans, you can almost reach out and touch them, yet you are so far away – it's an extra jab that must make the isolation seem all the more real.

Lately, when I think of the abandonment Christ must have felt on the cross, I think of these people.

I have met with people I doubt would have seen a face from the outside world for weeks. And in that abandonment, in that loneliness, I've sensed a very human build up of resentment and anger, perhaps at the outside world, but more likely directed inwardly - folks that have been away from the world so long that they lose themselves in the flow of the river.

But when the camera comes on, and I tell folks that I want to know what it is they do, to tell their story - that they come alive. Their eyes light up, and by telling a story **and having a listener**, I feel as though they once again become connected to who they actually are, they speak warmly about loved ones they never see, places they may never return to, and are for once proud to demonstrate what their skill is, what their gift to the world is.

I have been so fortunate to listen to people tell their stories – I feel as though I have been forgiven many times over, maybe just like one of the people at Calvary who didn't even know what was going on, why they needed forgiveness. I thank men and women like Leroy and Bernice, Tony, Kim, Johnny and Rod who have given their lives to the river...and I hope that by having the chance to tell their story, they have forgiven the world, and maybe the river itself - and that they are able to forgive themselves, and remember who it is they are, and see the good.

I have been fed, loved, cared for, helped, all because I could help someone tell their story. Everyone has a story to tell, they just need someone to listen.

A person or community with a story to tell, but no one to hear it, is a great tragedy. This week as we tell the story of the saviour of the world, let us remember how important it is to tell the stories, and listen to the stories of those he came to save.