

On The Cross

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:34

Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing

Throughout my childhood and for many years thereafter, my mother suffered from intense, occasionally debilitating, migraine headaches. Because our father was away most workweeks, my brother and I absorbed the brunt of my mother's extreme irritability during the worst of those episodes. It took many years of maturing to realize that my mother's reaction to her worse migraines was not an uncommon response to prolonged excruciating pain or extraordinary stress -- even towards our most cherished loved ones.

When I think of the Easter experience, my mind often goes to how much pain Jesus had to suffer while He was on the cross and *how He reacted to it*. We know from His anguished sweating "like drops of blood" during His prayer the night before, that crucifixion was something He would have preferred to avoid. Yet here He was on the cross during the final moments of His existence as a human: His swollen head throbbing incessantly from the embedded crown of thorns and the beatings He had received from the Roman troops hours earlier; the unimaginable pain of the nails piercing His hands and feet; and the intense burning of His every muscle and joint as they strained under the weight of His essentially lifeless body affixed as it was to the cross by only the nails and some ropes around His wrists.

Jesus' reaction to all this very human but hardly imaginable agony, however, was the opposite of irritability! Rather, it was the perfect personification of how Jesus lived His life on earth and what He constantly taught about loving our neighbors at least as much as we love ourselves! First, even in His indescribable pain, He summoned the clarity of thought and compassion to beg his Father to forgive his tormentors, rather than punish them. Then, He sought to calm the suffering of the prisoner on the cross next to Him with the blessing of *immediate peace and eternal life* in paradise. Jesus' remarkable loving grace despite so much pain caused me throughout my younger years to automatically assume that Jesus' divine "superpowers" had kept Him from actually hurting much while He was on the cross.

I know that the real story of the Lenten Season is His resurrection, but perhaps because of my shame over my initial immature and erroneous understanding of the true humanity of Jesus, I now never look at a cross, nor think of the resurrection events, that I don't first think of how much Jesus genuinely suffered in human terms to give us the opportunity for eternal life, and that He endured that suffering with the same love and grace with which He lived the entirety of His human life among us.

Prayer: Loving Father, we are forever grateful that You love us so much You want all of us to spend eternity with You and Your loved ones and that you sent Your Son to live among us, die, and be resurrected to give us that opportunity to do so. Please help us always to honor both Your great love for us and Your Son's enormous suffering on our behalf by being constantly mindful of His teaching - in His life and His death - that we are always to love all of Your children at least as much as we love ourselves. Amen

-Submitted by Dan Bell for the Nineteenth Reading of Lent.