

Good Friday
St. Luke 23:34; St. Luke 13:6-9

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus told a parable of a man who owned a vineyard. He had a hired vinedresser. In his vineyard was a fig tree. Over the course of three years, day after day, in season, the man went to the tree looking for fruit. He never found any. He told his man to cut it down; "Why should it use up the ground?"

To the man, this tree was a waste of space and resources. He let it live and grow for three years, hoping that it would produce fruit—that it would do what it is supposed to do. It never did. Why should this tree continue to take the time and land away from some other tree or plant that would actually produce fruit? Why should the man bear with it any longer waiting for this fig tree to do the thing for which it was planted.

But the vinedresser had another idea. Give it another year. He would dig a trench around it and fill it with fertilizer. He would pay it some extra special attention, give it some extra care. And if, at the end of that year of more and better care it still did not produce fruit, cut it down. The vinedresser told his master, "Let it alone this year also."

Now, this seems like an odd text to bring up when you've just heard of the Passion of Jesus according to St. John. As you know, however, Jesus spoke seven times from the cross before He died. John gives three of those words. The other four come from Matthew and Luke. The parable of the fig tree is related to the first word: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Now, I could go into how characters are related. On the outset, the man who owned the vineyard would be the Father and the vinedresser would be the Son. That connection can be made, despite Jesus at one time referring to the Father as the Vinedresser because when He did so, He called Himself the vine, so for the sake of this parable, the characters are different than in that I AM from St. John's Gospel. (cf. John 15:1ff) In the parable of the fig tree, the man in righteous wrath wants to cut down the tree, but the vinedresser pleads the case for the tree. That would mean that the tree is representative of those for whom Jesus prayed on the cross.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the parable and its relation to the first of Jesus' seven last words is that when the vinedresser said, "Let it alone," he used the same word in Greek as Jesus did from the cross when He begged, "Forgive them." The plea for mercy is the same in both cases.

So, when the vinedresser pled for mercy, he sought to stay the wrath of the owner of the vineyard. Likewise, when Jesus pled for mercy, he sought to stay the wrath of the Father against those who were crucifying Him.

It's an odd request, if you really think about it. First, that Jesus would beg the Father's forgiveness for those who are crucifying Him, putting to death an innocent man, convicted in a sham trial—this punishment only had the appearance of being proper and righteous. Such an act would most certainly draw the ire of God the Father. Yet, it had to be done. That God would use such an evil act—a murder—is a mystery, apart from the need for shedding of blood toward the remission of sins. (cf. Hebrews 9:22)

Did Jesus' executioners know what they were doing? I would say not. Jesus said as much. I'm sure they had no idea that they were playing a part in their own salvation, and that of the world. I suppose, however, that Jesus' words meant more than they didn't know that they were pawns in the execution of an innocent man, even including those who knew that His trial was a sham. Jesus once told his opponents that they were children of the devil, and they would not hear it. (cf. John 8:44) These

knew that they were doing that which was evil, but I'm of the mind that they believed they were doing it for some greater good, even if they only had to convince themselves that what they were doing was right, even if it involved an evil act. In short, they were deceived, so they didn't know what they were doing, and Jesus pled for mercy.

And Jesus shed His blood and gave His life in order that they would receive mercy. Who knows, maybe some of them repented and received that which was spoken before Pilate: "His blood be on us and on our children." (Matthew 27:25) Leave it alone, the vinedresser begged. Perhaps in a year the tree will bear fruit. Who knows about Jesus' executioners, right? But this I do know, had any of them repented and confessed the faith, the angels and the whole company of heaven rejoiced over him. (cf. Luke 15:7, 10)

Doesn't it seem like it would be a good thing if Jesus' prayer as He hung on the cross could be extended to you? After all, you do find yourself afflicted by times of doing things that, in hindsight, you know you ought not to have done, sometimes even things which you didn't even think evil or sinful in the moment—you did not know what you were doing. You know that God, in His holiness and righteousness, ought to exact His wrath against you. So, the desire for mercy makes sense.

The good news, dear hearers, is that Jesus Christ is your shield, your sure defense. In giving His life on the cross, Jesus received all the wrath due you, because He placed Himself between you and the wrath of the Father. Jesus gave His life as a ransom for many, including your ransom.

So, He has pled on your behalf. He implores the Father for you, as the vinedresser did the owner of the vineyard, to have mercy on you because you are one for whom He has died. "Father, forgive them, let them be..." And you are—you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.