

S.P.A.C.E. for Advent Wednesday 16th December 2020

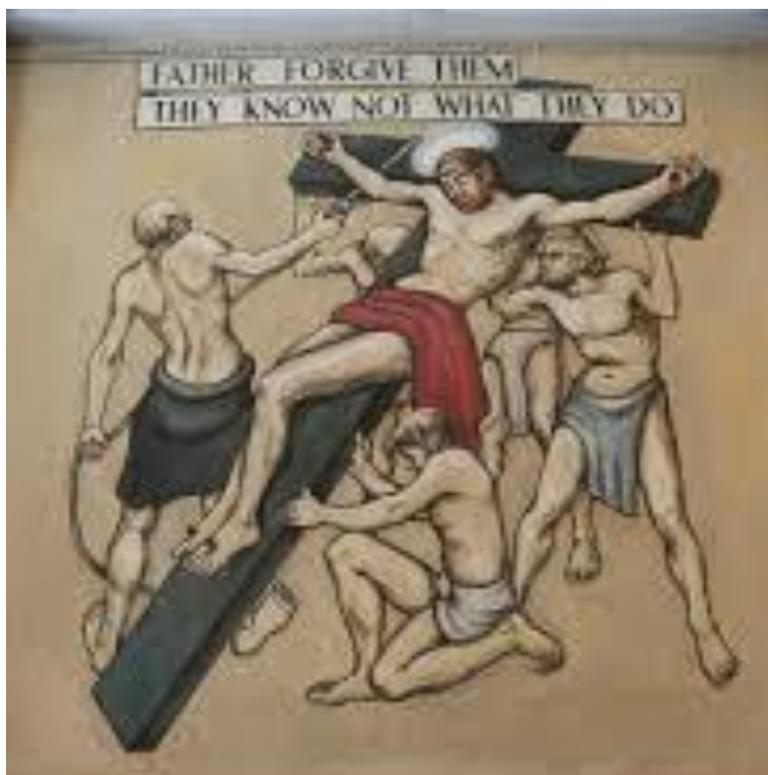
Advent, a time of coming – coming to forgive sins

³⁻⁶ Praise be to God for giving us through Christ every possible spiritual benefit as citizens of Heaven! For consider what he has done—before the foundation of the world he chose us to become, in Christ, his holy and blameless children living within his constant care. He planned, in his purpose of love, that we should be adopted as his own children through Jesus Christ—that we might learn to praise that glorious generosity of his which has made us welcome in the everlasting love he bears towards the Son.

⁷⁻¹⁰ It is through the Son, at the cost of his own blood, that we are redeemed, freely forgiven through that full and generous grace which has overflowed into our lives and opened our eyes to the truth. For God had allowed us to know the secret of his plan, and it is this: he purposes in his sovereign will that all human history shall be consummated in Christ, that everything that exists in Heaven or earth shall find its perfection and fulfilment in him.

¹¹⁻¹⁴ And here is the staggering thing—that in all which will one day belong to him we have been promised a share (since we were long ago destined for this by the one who achieves his purposes by his sovereign will), so that we, as the first to put our confidence in Christ, may bring praise to his glory! And you too trusted him, when you heard the message of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. And after you gave your confidence to him you were, so to speak, stamped with the promised Holy Spirit as a guarantee of purchase, until the day when God completes the redemption of what he has paid for as his own; and that will again be to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:3-14 (J. B. Phillips' translation)



Father Forgive Them Stanley Warren 1942

A mural from St. Luke's Chapel, Changi, Singapore

Downloaded from <https://thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com/>

Today's theme (coming to forgive sins) follows naturally from the previous topic (coming to exercise judgement, 2nd Dec). Both were taken from a series suggested for Advent. The reading from Ephesians reminds us of how our forgiveness came about. Rather than add my own speculations to Paul's powerful summary of the theology of atonement and redemption, this week I offer a painting and the words of a hymn and from a psalm to help us in our meditations.

This mural is striking by the way in which we see forgiveness operating on three levels, and made more so by the circumstances in which it was painted (*see below*).

1. Jesus dying on the cross provides the means by which all who believe may be forgiven:

"...we are redeemed, freely forgiven through that full and generous grace which has overflowed into our lives and opened our eyes to the truth" (Ephesians 1:7)

We see Jesus as the willing but passive victim, the suffering servant, giving his life in the wonderful act of redemption offered to the whole of humanity. It reminds us of the general but inclusive nature of forgiveness.

2. Yet even as Jesus is being crucified he actively intercedes for the men who are bringing about his death. This was wholehearted, red-blooded, undeserved and unsought forgiveness, offered by the dying man to his executioners. It was specific forgiveness in action. It has a very different feel from the homely narrative of forgiveness we know from the poignant story of the Lost Son. Forgiveness comes in many different circumstances but is always powerful.

3. Finally we see the power of forgiveness working through others. The artist, a prisoner of war, chose to paint this subject for a mural in a makeshift hospital chapel in Changi POW camp. It is an expression of forgiveness to his jailors. Through understanding our own forgiveness we are released to forgive others. Such human forgiveness is a powerful witness to the forgiveness offered to us by our loving Heavenly Father

The expectation of Advent is not totally fulfilled by Jesus's birth, though that brings a wonderful and joyful conclusion to the first stage of that process, nor even by the conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry in his crucifixion and resurrection, momentous as those events are. The expectation of Advent becomes fully realised only when lives are transformed. Our ability to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged or hurt us is a powerful expression of that transformation.

The story of the murals of St Luke's Chapel Changi

Five murals were painted by Stanley Warren, a poster artist in civilian life. While serving in the army he was used as an Observation Post Assistant because of his ability to sketch enemy positions quickly and accurately. After being taken prisoner he became seriously ill due to overwork and undernourishment. During his recovery he agreed to start painting a series of murals to decorate the hospital chapel. He was still weak and could paint only for short bursts of a few minutes at a time and in two hours would be exhausted.

The subjects of his five murals were chosen to emphasise peace and reconciliation. The Crucifixion scene above is the most powerful, carrying a clear message of forgiveness and love. Warren depicts those crucifying Jesus as slaves rather than Roman soldiers. It was a way of saying those who had mistreated him and his fellow POWs - the Japanese conscripts, Koreans or Indians who acted as prison guards - were the slaves of their commanders. It was a message that his guards seemed to understand as they showed particular interest in this painting.

How easy do we find it to forgive others? Is there anyone we need to forgive?

For prayerful reflection

Have a look at this well-known hymn written in 1763 by Revd Augustus Toplady and inspired by an incident in which he sought refuge from a storm in a cleft in the Mendip Hills, Somerset.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgement throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee

...and some words from Psalm 32

³When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.^[b]

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, 'I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD.'

And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

The next S.P.A.C.E. reflection will be posted on January 6th