

1. During Lent we will be listening to the words Jesus spoke from the cross. They are short sayings because he could not speak much in that terrible position. But as 'last words' they are very meaningful. Today we hear Jesus praying, 'Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.'
2. Forgiveness is a key Christian idea. Jesus' death brings us forgiveness. We need forgiveness, otherwise we die in our sins. (Animal sacrifices are not effective.) In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his followers to ask for forgiveness but also to promise that they will forgive others. We receive forgiveness and we give it. For most of us, the former is much easier than the latter.
3. Jesus is dying a cruel death. He has the right to be angry with his torturers. Yet He is not vindictive. In his need, he is still able to 'see' others; He does not even pray for Himself. His own sacrifice is the ground of the forgiveness for which He prays.
Jesus forgives – but for us it is hard to do the same. I read about the widow of someone who was murdered; this widow is unable and unwilling to forgive the murderer. The red-top newspapers and even the BBC give voice to people who don't want to forgive. We have many words for this attitude: repay, pay back, avenge, get revenge, take vengeance, retaliate, strike back and more.
4. Over against the newspapers, think of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch lady imprisoned in a German concentration camp for saving Jews, together with her sister. Her sister was killed by the horrible circumstances. Corrie survived and later learned to forgive the Germans. With her message of forgiveness she travelled the world and became a blessing to many. Some of you have one of her books.
Forgiveness sets us free from our 'opponents'; we let them go so they lose their grip on us. If we fail to forgive, we remain their victims even long after the event. You may know an embittered person who can't forgive; such people are not nice company. In fact the Greek word for forgive also means 'let go', 'send off'.
5. Being a Christian, a follower of Christ Jesus, means that you can and have to transcend your natural self. This is your own interest. A natural person is unlikely to forgive, but a follower of Jesus prays 'forgive my sins as I forgive others'. It is in your own interest! We have nothing to give but everything to receive. We come with empty hands, unable to forgive in our own strength. We need grace to do it. To let go. What we suffered can be bad – although hardly as bad as Jesus' suffering.
6. Forgiving a bad person still goes against our instinct, even after many centuries of 'Christian' civilisation. This civilisation is only a thin veneer. Only God's power can help us forgive. It also helps when we realise: Jesus was here before me; and when we take inspiration from Corrie ten Boom and others who could forgive.
7. This is an offer: there is forgiveness for all; for you too! Jesus achieved it on the cross. This is also an invitation: the ability to forgive the other is vital for your spiritual growth.