

## Reflections for Good Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2021 - *Seven Last Words*

### **Introduction**

We consider anyone's last words before they die to be of special significance. We remember them, record them, respect them, cherish them. Christian tradition treats Jesus' last words as of the greatest significance. The Gospels record Jesus as speaking seven times during the tormented hours of his crucifixion – his 'seven last words' from the cross. They are spread between the Gospels: three each in Luke and John, whilst Matthew and Mark record the same single statement. There's nothing obviously coherent about them – no special order of significance, no theological treatise; certainly no self-justification, or explanation of what it all means (although all are suggestive in different ways). And yet, for at least 800 years, these words have been a source of devotion for Christians, especially for this day, when we commemorate his death – if nothing else, giving pause for thought about why this most awful of days should be called Good Friday.

### **Collect**

*Eternal God, in the cross of Jesus we see the cost of sin and the depth of your love: in humble hope and fear may we place at his feet all that we have and all that we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

### **Reading: Luke 23: 33-47**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Word: Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**

They had scourged him, lacerating his body; they had put a crown of thorns on his head; they had insulted him, mocked him, made fun of what they took to be his pretensions of being 'king of the Jews'. They were now nailing him to the cross. In the torment, he breathes out forgiveness – forgiveness for these brutal soldiers, for their pay-masters and commanders, for Pontius Pilate, for Caiaphas and Annas and all the religious establishment, for Judas who betrayed and disciples who ran... for all the human race whose sin has put him there.

'For they do not know what they do': I want to cry out: they did know. They knew all about the imposition of power, the brute force that inflicts pain, the desire to cause humiliation and shame – arms pinned back to make the victim helpless. Execution squads know about all such things. They didn't know to whom they were doing it. They didn't know (or probably care) about the innocence of the convicted man. They didn't know that the one they were so determined to kill was the very One whose words give life. And they didn't know what such actions did to themselves, that those who pursue brutality are themselves brutalised, hardened to the point of losing their own humanity. Jesus' words of forgiveness opened a crack in the hardened shell, at least for one, a centurion, who at the end was moved to announce Jesus was an innocent man. These men didn't ask for forgiveness, but Jesus forgave: change begins here.

'Forgive' was the first word Jesus spoke from the cross. We probably couldn't cope with listening to the Passion of Christ unless we had first been assured of forgiveness. It is because of forgiveness we dare to remember that we, human beings, killed the Son of God. Because of forgiveness, we dare to face up to what we have done. It's not 'forgive and forget,' but forgive and remember; accept forgiveness and be changed. Having been forgiven, don't be defined by what you've previously got wrong, but be freed to be involved in putting the world right. Then, whatever in us had appeared sterile and barren becomes fruitful, what was pointless becomes meaningful, what was dead comes alive. Forgiveness is here, waiting for us. The crucifixion begins with forgiveness. Jesus first word is, '*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*'

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Word: Today you will be with me in paradise.**

St Luke builds up the scene of Calvary to depict a kind of inverted throne room. Three crosses stand on the skyline, like three thrones. The sign over the middle cross announces, 'This is the king of Jews'. Already he's been given a crown (of thorns) and a kingly robe (soldiers cape). There are even those who, like royal cupbearers, offer him wine-vinegar to drink. It's all mockery of course, all about proving their strength and his total helplessness before them. But St Luke knows, and we the readers know, words meant to mock actually speak the truth: this is the true King.

One man who was right there recognises the truth. One man knows that, though he is pinioned to a wooden beam, Jesus has the real authority. The so-called 'good thief,' or 'repentant criminal,' knows it is still worth petitioning a king, even in his hour of death, and so asks to be remembered when the King comes into his kingdom. And he gets an extraordinary promise in return: paradise. Nothing could be more different from the darkness of Calvary, full of pain and blood and cries. 'Paradise' means a walled garden. It evokes the Garden of Eden. Paradise is peace, paradise is abundant life, paradise is the garden of delight – above all, it is proximity to the living, loving God, who walks, as at Eden, in the cool of the day.

I am always suspicious of a Christianity that sounds like escapism. The purpose of life on this world is not, simply, a preparation for the next. But as here, when life slowly and painfully ebbs away, and when there can be no escape, nothing is more important than to keep a vision of glory alive, and in final tortuous breaths, to trust oneself into the hands of the King of kings for a beautiful future.  
*'Today, you will be with me in paradise.'*

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Word:**

***Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your Son'; and to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother.'***

Over the previous 18 hours the community of disciples had fallen apart. All had given their protestations of loyalty, but Judas betrayed, Peter denied, disciples scattered. The group, called to exemplify Jesus' teaching and reflect his light, has collapsed. But now, at the darkest moment, at the foot of the cross, there are the first stirrings of rebirth, the genesis of a new family. A grieving mother is given a son; the beloved disciple is given a mother.

This is the birth of the church. There are other moments that get that label – Maundy Thursday, with the gift of the Eucharist; Pentecost with the gift of the Holy Spirit. But that we start at the cross matters because here it deals with the breakdown of human efforts at community-building – the failure to put others before yourself; the self-seeking instincts that had made James and John want to claim superiority. But the new community has to be born at the cross, because it is the cross that deals with pride, self-absorption and self-promotion that's so destructive. All this melts away before the cross.

It's a natural human trait to want to belong, and to find common ground with those with whom we share this belonging. We want to belong somewhere and to something, whether it's town or country or football team; faith, church or denomination; gender, class or ethnicity. But as a result, we define ourselves against others – those who are not us or like us. Our identity then comes by exclusion. Jesus does not 'belong' (in this sense). In Jesus, God comes among us as one rejected and cast out. Whoever are 'his own', they received him not.

That's why the church must begin at the foot of the cross. Before the cross we recognise our shared need for forgiveness, which, ultimately, is what we have in common. At the foot of the cross, we behold one another – son, mother, brother, sister, father – not with human eyes, looking for distinctions, but seeing the grace of God in one another. By his grace alone, all are made part of the one family. *'Mother, behold your son... Behold your mother.'*

### **4<sup>th</sup> Word**

Mark 15: 33-37 – At the sixth hour darkness came over the land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?" – which means, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he is calling Elijah. One man ran and filled a sponge with wine vinegar and put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***

These are the only words recorded in Matthew and Mark's Gospels as spoken by Jesus from the cross. These two Gospel-writers paint pictures of unrelieved desolation. Jesus is in complete isolation – family, friends, followers all scattered; executioners, passers-by and fellow-convicts all hostile, cynical and mocking. There is no distraction from the sheer dreadfulness of the scene. Jesus' appalling cry of desolation echoes across the dark world. No one answers. No one comes. No one comforts. Jesus dies alone.

‘Only the crucified God can help.’ This must be true for those whose suffering is almost unimaginable to the rest of us – victims of appalling crimes, genocides, abductions; and indeed those mistreated and abused in ways that sound mundane but that happens with unremitting frequency such as to undermine their humanity. To know God suffers matters more than the offer of any instant rescue package. It matters to know God has gone to the depths. We recognise today that to have any moral credibility you have to have been through it, you have to have had the experience, to have struggled, and to have suffered. So, it matters that God’s suffering is on a level with the worst we could possibly suffer... that Jesus could only shout and scream; that he was not whisked away from his cross. It matters that, whatever fore-knowledge he had of resurrection, that knowledge was overwhelmed by the current reality of crucifixion. Where is God in suffering? He is right there, on the gallows.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Jesus’ cry seems to tear in two the fabric of creation. For the first and only occasion in eternity there is a rupture in the God-head.

The full force of human sin bears down on Jesus’ shoulders and separates Son from Father. A shadow falls across that perfect relationship of love that transcends time and space. Darkness has descended. After the cry, silence. *‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*

**5<sup>th</sup> Word: *After this, Jesus, knowing that all was finished, said (to fulfil the Scriptures) ‘I thirst’***

It’s said that our bodies are 98% water. Dehydration is the seeping away of our very being, our substance. We feel that we are evaporating. Dehydration is one of the many horrors of crucifixion. Words from Psalm 22 prefigure what Jesus went through: ‘I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax. It has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You lay me in the dust of death’ (Psalm 22: 14-15). It’s a telling image.

The Psalms also picture our search for God as thirst. Psalm 42: ‘As the deer longs for the water, so longs my soul for you.’ Psalm 63: ‘O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.’ John’s Gospel presents Jesus as the end of this search and the source of spiritual water.

Most emphatically, John 7: 37 – ‘On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow within them”.’ But now Jesus thirsts.

When Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, before promising her ‘the water that becomes a spring welling up to eternal life,’ he first asks her to draw water for him to drink, and this prompts a long conversation – even sparring match – which both of them seem to enjoy: It’s the sort of conversation from which friendship grows. And you could say it represents what Jesus came for – God’s reaching out in friendship to human beings.

On the cross, Jesus thirsts physically and horribly, but it’s the spiritual thirst that holds him there. Even more than the Psalmist’s expression of longing and yearning for God, God thirsts for us – our love, our friendship. The cross shows just how deep that longing is. God thirsts to spend eternity with us. *Jesus said, to fulfil Scripture, I thirst.*

**6<sup>th</sup> Word: *It is finished***

Finished – over – done and dusted – end of story. To the human view, anyway, it was all over – a revolutionary movement snuffed out before its fire could catch hold. There was no mass uprising in support of its martyred leader; and no armed intervention from outside either. Nor was there heavenly intervention – no bolt of lightning on Pilate’s palace, no battalion of the angelic host, no appearance of Elijah (as some apparently thought possible). Jesus was about to breathe his last. All he’d said and done, all his followers’ hopes and expectations, all his enemies’ fears and nightmares were over, finished. Except ... except of course it isn’t. We believe the cross was not the end. We know there will be a new chapter – an Easter morning turn-around. And, according to the Gospels, Jesus himself had predicted it. So, what was finished, at 3 o’clock on that dark and dreadful afternoon?

Finished, we should remember, does not mean defeated. At the end of the match the whistle goes on both victors and vanquished, and both are exhausted. If the cross was victory (even if it looked like defeat) – victory already won but only made public three days later – then surely we have to redefine what winning looks like. The idea that victory is about who's cheering and who's weeping, about who's left in power and who's left in the dirt; the idea that it's decided by strength or money or numbers or style – all these are finished. On the cross, the powers of this world are brought under judgment and found wanting. All the assumptions of this world are brought under judgment and found wanting. There is a currency that's no longer valid. The only currency that matters is love.

'Finished' is not all there is to it. 'Finished' also means completed, fulfilled, even perfected. 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to perfection.'

With those words in chapter 13, St John introduces his description of Jesus' simplest yet most compelling act of service – washing his disciples' feet. This action overturns all ideas of status and precedence and hierarchy, and set them an example to live by. It also introduces the whole Passion Narrative in John's Gospel: what Jesus had shown in simple terms he now lives out to its ultimate conclusion. His death is love brought to perfection. 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his life for his friends.' Unlike the pretensions of this world, love is not finished by death. Love is perfected through the death of the Lord Jesus. After six hours on the cross, it is love that is victorious.

*It is finished.*

### **7<sup>th</sup> Word: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.**

St Luke, who gave us Jesus' first words from the cross, also gives his last, and both are directed to his heavenly Father. They are words of trust and of peace. No more do we hear the piercing agony, the heart-rending pain, the cataclysmic cry of desolation. Jesus' struggle is over; he has given his all, and all is safe now in his Father's hands.

We live in an age of anxiety – health (above all), children, jobs ... our future. Our society is beset with deep insecurity, a collapse of trust. Even though we in the West are actually more protected and safer than any previous generation (even in this year) somehow we are more afraid. I am pretty sure that, ironically, it comes out of a culture of control. If we can't control it (or imagine we do) we don't trust it. We are so used to controlling so much – technology is so powerful – and yet now it takes something so tiny to make us realise that our control is an illusion. Matters of life and death do not belong fully in our own hands. In the face of death, we need to be able to trust – trust in a heavenly Father, into whose hands we can place our spirits.

'Don't worry. It's not the end of the world,' they say. When Jesus died, it was the end of the world as it had been. The eclipse of the sun, the earthquakes and tombs opening and dead walking all point to that fact. The world, as it had been known, was over. But the day that world ended was only two days from the dawn of a new world. What was different? Death itself had been defeated. Death was proven not to be the end. And that means, as the Bible's message repeats from start to finish, there is nothing of which we need to be afraid. Jesus would rest in peace, and rise in glory, and so shall all who trust in him.

*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*

### **Reading: John 19: 17-30**

#### **Intercessions**

#### **Closing Prayer**

*Jesus, Master Carpenter of Nazareth,  
who through wood and nails did win our full salvation,  
wield well your tools in this, your workshop,  
that we who come to you rough hewn  
may here be fashioned to a truer beauty by your hand. Amen.*