

Good Friday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
2 April 2021

The Seven Last Words of Jesus on the Cross

Welcome to this tragic day, a day of darkness, injustice, betrayal, and death. I remember as a child, feeling extremely sad at what was happening to Jesus of Nazareth on this day. I also remember vividly our priests passionately preaching on the Seven Last Words of Jesus on the Cross. This was such a foundational part of my faith as I was growing up, that I thought there was a book in the Bible that contained these last seven words in the same order and with the same language my priests used. But this is not the case. In fact, when you read the passion narratives in the four Gospels, you encounter significant differences from passage to passage. You can not find a unified document where you can find all these seven words together.

Matthew and Mark give us great detail about the arrest, trial, and final march to Golgotha, but in Matthew and Mark Jesus only speaks once from the cross. Luke is concerned about historical accuracy, so he gives us details that the others do not give us. He has Jesus speak three times from the cross. John has been concerned about establishing Jesus as the Divine Messiah who dies to fulfill the Scriptures, so he gives us a more spiritual passage, where Jesus speaks three times from the cross to fulfill the Scriptures. So, in order to get a fuller picture of Jesus' last hours we must read all four Gospels together.

The first word Jesus speaks on the cross comes from Luke: Jesus Said, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."** (Luke 23:34). This expression is found only in the Gospel of Luke, moments after he is nailed to a cross between two criminals. Jesus prays that God may forgive his enemies. All of his enemies: The Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, Herod, the soldiers who have beaten him, ridiculed him, tortured him, crucified him. But the list of enemies does not end there. Jesus also asks for forgiveness for the one who betrayed him, the disciples who abandoned him, Peter who denied him, and the crowd who welcomed him like a king on Sunday, but shouted "Crucify him, crucify him" on Good Friday.

He also cries out a word of forgiveness for us who often betray him, abandon him, and take him for granted. Even though he is tormented by the great pain of nails piercing hands and feet, bloody welts on his skin, feelings of abandonment and crushing loneliness, he does not call on God to avenge his honor, to punish the aggressors, or to rescue him from the agony of the cross. He asks for forgiveness for our ignorance. He puts into practice the prayer he taught his disciples when he said, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." He forgives as he instructed Peter, "seventy times seven." He forgives as he forgave the adulteress woman who was

caught in her sin. He forgives because he loves. Love and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin and Christ came into the world to save sinners.

Jesus' second word also comes from Luke. He responds to the thief who repented, **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."** (Luke 23:43.) There must have been a chorus of angels in heaven rejoicing, for Jesus once said, "there is more rejoicing for a sinner who repents than for 100 who are in no need of repentance." In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is constantly speaking of the return of the wayward. Here, next to him, is the prodigal son. Here is the lost sheep the good Shepherd came to find. Here is the lost coin that is found. This expression of Jesus, which is only found in the Gospel of Luke, is good news for all of us. Here is God's amazing Grace that saves a wretch like this criminal and continues to save sinners like you and me even today. Jesus has come to earth to look for the lost, and even at the cross, he will not rest until he finds them all.

The next word is from the Gospel of John. "Jesus said to his mother: **"Woman, this is your son."** Then he said to the disciple, **"This is your mother."** (John 19:26-27.) Jesus' mother was in many ways his first disciple. She was there at the annunciation, at the birth, when the boy was growing up, at his first miracle in Cana of Galilee, and now she is here at the foot of the Cross. A sword of grief is now piercing her soul, as it was announced by Simeon, the old prophet at the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2:35). At some point, Jesus looks at John, his beloved disciple, the only apostle able to witness the crucifixion, and with deep concern for the welfare of his elderly mother, he commends her to his care. Whether Jesus had brothers and sisters who could have cared for Mary is irrelevant. Jesus, as the oldest son, has the right to assign the care of his mother to John. Once again, we see Jesus rising above the pain and suffering to care for those he loves.

The next last word is found both in Matthew and Mark. **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.) Jesus uttered these words around 3:00 in the afternoon. You may remember that he had been crucified approximately at 9:00am in the morning, after a three hour march to the place of execution. By now he has been dying on this cross for six hours. It was a hot, humid day in Palestine. Flies are buzzing about, sweat is pouring from his semi-naked body, the excruciating pain of his wounds is intolerable, and his loneliness is complete and crushing. This is a cry of anguish that comes directly from Psalm 22.

By exclaiming in a loud voice how abandoned by God he feels, Jesus captures the emotion and the anguish of those who have suffered in every generation. Those dying in concentration camps, those being exterminated in Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Myanmar, and other places. He gives voice to the cries of the poor in every generation. Those words could be heard in the slums of Latin America, in the ruins of Haiti, in the killing fields of Darfur and the Nubba mountains of Sudan, and in dark prisons where political dissidents die slow deaths around the world. This is the cry of the oppressed and marginalized. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus is utterly alone, and he must face death

alone. The burden of humanity's sin overwhelms this own humanity. He feels abandoned by God. We who stand on this side of the resurrection know that it is precisely at these times of absolute anguish that God is the most present in our lives. But at this very hour, all our Messiah can see and feel is the crushing agony of pain and despair. Jesus knows this is the ransom he must pay; this is the very hour for which he was born. He gives voice to the voiceless and dies their death. This is his darkest and yet, his finest hour.

The next two words, **"I thirst"** and **"It is Finished"** come from John (John 19:28-30.) Jesus thirsts as the physical effects of the loss of blood. The heat and the shutting down of organs make him extremely thirsty. Jesus is now in shock, and as they give him wine mixed with gall, he utters his sixth word, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Both of these words are the recognition that his suffering is over, and his task is completed. Jesus was obedient to the Father to the very end, dying on a Cross. The work is done once and for all. The chasm between God and humanity has been bridged. The last sacrifice has been offered. The Lamb of God has been slaughtered. It is finished!

The Gospel of Luke now tells us that Jesus cried out in a loud voice, **"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"** (Luke 23:46). And then Jesus finally dies. There is a lot more that can be said about these last three words, each of which fulfills Biblical prophecy of the Old Testament. Suffice it to say that Christ gave his spirit in utter and total obedience to the Father's will.

Now today, as we contemplate a dying man, I invite you to lower your guard, break down your defenses, and let God see you as you really are in your humanity. Today is the day to unveil the pain you may be covering up, to reveal your wounds, to voice your fears. Today is the day to embrace your humanity fully. Come to this cross and lay at its foot all your anguish and your fear. Christ will take your pain today. He will die your death today. He will suffer your affliction today. You are not alone. Your Messiah knows your pain, for he himself has suffered your pain.

So, come and be free. Amen!