

Good Friday Meditation: “The Seven Last Words”

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There is a tradition of marking Good Friday with a service that begins at noon and continues until three o'clock. It is worship that remembers the three hours of darkness when the sun does not shine. In these services it is customary to have not one sermon, not two, not even three, but seven, yes seven, sermons! Imagine. A sermon marathon. In some communities multiple congregations gather to mark the three hours, inviting seven different preachers to preach seven different sermons. Each sermon considers one of the seven last words that Jesus utters from the cross. Some of you are right now saying prayers of thanksgiving that we do not have a similar tradition here. You will forgive me if I confess that it is a dream of mine to one day be one of seven preachers caught up in the Spirit, proclaiming the gospel on this crucial day. But since such a service does not appear to be on the immediate horizon, I am taking the liberty of lining out a brief synopsis of seven sermons that might be preached if we decided to stay behind at noon until three this afternoon.

John's gospel records three of the seven words. Luke records three more. Matthew and Mark each record the same one, making the total seven. Seven is a significant number in the Bible. It is a number of completeness. Together these final words provide the church with a powerfully complete meditation on the gospel and the cross. They also give us speech for our own dying, our own suffering, our own participation in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. When we wonder what a good death, a faithful death, a death that participates in Christ's dying and rising is like, we speak and we listen for words like these.

“Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness. With Jesus, it always involves forgiveness. Welcoming sinners. Teaching us to pray, “Forgive us as we forgive.” Answering the question of how many times with (choose your translation) “seventy-seven times” or “seventy times seven.” Lifting the cup saying, “This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” His death on the cross is itself God's massive work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Soon Jesus, risen from the dead, will breathe on his disciples saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” Forgive. Forgiven. Hard words to utter. Painful words to embody. Words that require dying to the wrong that has been done so that life in relationship can be restored. And when forgiveness seems utterly beyond us, Jesus teaches us to pray, “Father forgive.”

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

It is Jesus' response to a fellow sufferer. “Jesus, remember me,” he cries, “when you come into your kingdom.” Remember me. Remember me because I am alone, because I have been forgotten, because I long to live in a realm where the last and the least are the first and the greatest, where the meek inherit the earth and the hungry are fed, where captives are freed and burdens are shared. “Today,” replies Jesus, “you

will be with me in paradise, in my kingdom come where God's will is done. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the kingdom of God, paradise, is at hand." It is as close, Jesus is as close, as the decision to turn and to receive and to enter.

"Woman, here is your son.... Here is your mother" (John 19:26-27).

On the cross Jesus is forming a new community, a new family, a new people. His adoption agency called the church is in full view. His mother is not left without a son. His beloved disciple is not orphaned. At the cross we discover once again what we learn first at baptism, that here water is thicker than blood. Here lost lambs are returned to the flock by the Good Shepherd. Here prodigal sons and daughters find, to their great surprise, that they are no longer "nobodies" given up for dead. Now they are redeemed "somebodies" who once were lost but now are found.

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

We regularly imagine that to feel abandoned by God is to lose faith in God. We portray ourselves as not good enough at believing. But here, on the cross, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, experiences God-forsakenness. It is not the result of Christ's lack of faith. It is a chapter in the human story. When God becomes incarnate in human flesh, God cannot escape this dark valley on the pilgrimage through life. Fortunately Jesus knows the mother tongue of the pilgrim people and has on his lips the Twenty-second Psalm, a poem of deep faith that beyond abandonment lies rescue, redemption, salvation.

"I thirst" (John 19:28).

Jesus, source of living water, thirsts. The one whose life is outpoured to quench our thirst is himself thirsty. Thirsty for water. Thirsty also perhaps for love, for life, for God's kingdom to come. He is in need. He cries out for care. He has burdens to be shared. We do not want to become burdens, dependent, needing care. We want to be on the giving, not the receiving end. But in the economy of the burden bearing society called the church, there comes a time when each one of us cries out in need: "I hunger, I thirst, I ache."

"It is finished" (John 19:30).

"It is finished, but it is not over."¹ These are words of completion, of fulfilment, of victory rather than of defeat. Jesus' death is the triumphant moment when the ages turn, when earth's axis shifts, when the curtain of the Temple is torn in two, and when God's suffering love is revealed for all to see and to know. It is finished, but it is not over. What is finished is our old way of self-created life. What is completed is the new world in which we now live, a world in which we no longer need to live captive to anxiety and our need to control, a world in which we are freed to live as agents of God's reconciling love. Because it is finished, but it is not over.

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Jesus is embarking on a journey of descent to the dead. He is on his way to the Father via "the ice cold silence of hell."² It is not that he has an immortal soul that will pass peacefully into joyous reunion in heaven. It is that he is about to die, to really die. It is what it means to be mortal, not immortal. What lies beyond the ice cold

silence of death is not our doing; it is not Jesus' doing. This cruciform pilgrimage through death to life is God's handiwork. It is this holy pilgrimage through death to life that we begin in our baptism and continue here today. In the words of the apostle Paul, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4)." So we too might walk in newness of life. It is true.

Notes

1 Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, 2004), 902.

2 Ibid., 96.