

Good Friday
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
30 March 2018

The Seven Last Words of Jesus on the Cross

I remember as a child, feeling extremely sad at what was happening to Jesus of Nazareth on this day. As priests passionately preached on the Seven Last Words of Jesus on the Cross, my mind would travel to that day in Palestine. In my mind's eye this was an extremely hot day and, since this was a garbage hill outside of a large city, the smell would have been a combination of rotting food and decomposing dead animals. Flies would have been everywhere, as the uncomfortable expectations tried hard to swat them away. The soldiers would have been in a particular bad mood, having to crucify these criminals during a festival week. They had all looked forward to the food, festivities, and fun these festivals in Palestinian towns provided. Instead, they are here at high noon, in the driest heat they could imagine, and not a single drop of rain in the horizon. No breeze blowing in from anywhere, drenched in sweat from head to toe, and having to be on hyper-alertness because crucifixions were always high drama affairs. The spectators would pass the long hours chanting insults at the accused, and it would be common for some to leave and return several times during the affair. Only the soldiers were mandated to stay. The scene was quite fluid with people coming and going throughout the day. The family most likely stayed nearby, in direct view of the scene, but cornered off and kept under guard as a safety precaution for the guards and any authorities present on this day.

Now, none of the Gospel writers give us all the details about what happened at these crucifixions. The reason is quite simple. They were writing to people who had most likely witnessed these common events and there was no need to fill in the details. In fact, when you read the Passion Narrative in the four Gospels, you encounter significant differences from passage to passage. 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 has particular theological concerns, so he gives us details that the others don't give us, which fit very well within his theology. 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. 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). 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, and 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, 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 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. 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 came into the world to save sinners.

The second word from the cross also comes from Luke. When one of the criminals crucified with him says, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom", Jesus responds, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:42-43). We just finished a six week study of the parables of Luke, Chapter 15 and all these parables lead to this moment. There is more rejoicing in heaven for a sinner who repents than for 100 who are in no need of repentance. Here, next to Jesus, is the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Prodigal Son. Here is God's amazing Grace that saves a wretch like this criminal, and continues to save sinners like you and me. This man was once lost, but now he is found. Today, this very day, he will be with Jesus in Paradise. Jesus has come to earth to look for the lost, and even at the cross, he will not rest until he finds them.

The third word from the cross is given to us by John in the reading of the passion for today. 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 is now piercing her soul, as it was announced by Simeon, (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, had 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.

Matthew and Mark give us the fourth word from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). By now he has been dying on this cross for six hours. Flies are buzzing about, sweat is pouring from his semi-naked body, the excruciating pain of his wounds is intolerable, 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 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 Nuba mountains of Sudan, in the 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 by himself. The burden of humanity's sin overwhelms this own humanity. He feels abandoned by God. At this dark hour, all our Messiah can see and feel is the crushing agony of pain and despair. He gives voice to the voiceless and dies their death. This is his darkest and yet, his finest hour.

The fifth word is **"I thirst"** and the sixth is **"It is Finished"**. (John 19:28-30) Both of these words come from the Gospel of John we read today. And John tells us that both of these words fulfill the Scriptures. The physical effects of the loss of blood, the heat, and the shutting down of organs are now causing shock. Jesus is physically dying now. 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 complete. 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 gives us the last word. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, **"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"** (Luke 23:46). After this exclamation, Jesus finally dies. He gave his spirit in utter and total obedience to the Father's will. Although he was the Son of God, he emptied himself for us, taking human form and dying a horrendous human death. His spirit now returns to his Father from where it came. As we contemplate a dying man today, 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 affliction, for he himself has suffered your pain. In a few moments we will invite you to place a small rock at the foot of the cross. This is a symbolic gesture, with great significance. That rock signifies your sin, your doubts, your resentments, your bitterness, your isolation, and your pain. That rock symbolizes anything that keeps you bound. Deposit this rock at the foot of this cross and give all your pain to Christ. He longs to take your pain away. So, come to this cross today and find the freedom you are searching for. Amen!