

MEDITATIONS
ON THE
SEVEN LAST WORDS
OF CHRIST



preached by
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on
Good Friday
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at
The Three Hours Devotion
Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue

THE FIRST WORD

“Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

Saint Luke 23:34

The Reverend Joel C. Daniels, Ph.D.

It is a common practice in many Christian communities to gather on Good Friday and hear and reflect on the last seven words of Christ as they are recorded in the Gospels. From that most terrible but wonderful of days—the day of crucifixion that we call “good”—we hear the last words our Lord spoke before he died, the last things he said before the ushering in of the new world that would be created by his resurrection.

We invest these seven words, then, with the utmost respect for their importance. Three o’clock on that Friday afternoon was a turning point in the history of creation, both a damning condemnation of human sin and an incredible revelation of the character of God. If Jesus is the icon of God, as we sometimes say, if Jesus is how we know who God is, then the willing acceptance of crucifixion, the self-giving offering that was carried out at that place, at that time, is the most important thing in the world.

And so it is interesting that we begin with the two words from the Gospel of Luke. Deep in chapter 23, we read this, “And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” “Father, forgive them.” The second word, to look ahead briefly, will also be from Luke, recording Jesus’ words with the others on crosses.

Note, then, the characters that these two words have in common: condemned criminals, and soldier-executioners.

It is worth remembering the point that this makes: for all of its cosmic significance, for all of its religious importance, for all the reasons that we are here two millennia later talking about it, for all of this and more, we are dealing with something mundane: a criminal matter, dealt with by the people who deal with criminal matters once they have been decided by the upper levels of government hierarchy. Once the men with grand titles and retinues and palaces make their solemn judgments, the responsibility falls to no doubt ordinary, and probably low-paid, workers, whose job it is to finish things up before they go home. I imagine that's what they're doing here: trying to get the criminals taken care of—that is, dead—so they can go home.

Thus the cruelty of these soldiers was of the casual kind, the kind that in dehumanized situations lends itself to passing the time—there's a reason they call it “gallows humor.” From the point of view of the soldiers, if what you see every day is a number of foreign men being crucified, that suffering itself can grow tedious over time, and so gambling over the few remaining possessions of the crucified isn't an incomprehensible response. The soldiers “cast lots to divide his clothing,” Luke says. It could have been the high point of their day.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” and in a way that's almost literally true of the soldiers who are there. After all, they weren't part of complex theological debates about the Messiah and what the Messiah does or who he is; they weren't reaping many of the benefits of occupying foreign lands; they weren't in charge of figuring out ways to keep the peace in a volatile political situation. They were trying to get through the day. Jesus being killed is no big deal.

“Father, forgive them.” We usually assume—and rightly, I think—that the “them” in that statement extends beyond just the soldiers, and to the powerful men who have given the soldiers that terrible commission. His “forgiveness” extends to the political actors and religious leaders of first-century Palestine, natives and occupiers alike, for whom a more blatant self-interest was involved in their decision-making. In one sense, after all, they did know what they were doing: they were executing a person innocent of sin, if not innocent of crime. The small group of Jesus-followers that the Galilean had

started with had grown exponentially, until whole towns were turning out to see him in a way that posed a significant threat to the established order. Insofar as this was a crime, it was one of which Jesus was guilty. But the fact that Jesus' life-giving ministry was a crime is an expression of human sinfulness. He came into the world and the world received him not, because that's what the world is like: it meets love incarnate and cannot cope with it; it meets love incarnate and rejects it; it meets love incarnate and kills him. That's what the world is like.

“Father, forgive them,” Jesus says, because they didn't know what they were doing. They may even have thought that they were doing the right thing. The expedient thing. The politic thing. And yet they need the forgiveness Jesus asks for.

They are respectable men who condemned Jesus; responsible workers who carried out the execution; common criminals who were on either side of him. Respectable; responsible; common: the characters of this mundane drama are men and women that are just like me. In many ways, this Good Friday story is my story: I could fit into this story as seamlessly as if I was born to play the part—and, in a sense, I was. I know the people depicted in the Good Friday story because they are my people; I am one of them and they are part of me. Whether we are the soldiers or the judges or the religious leaders or just the bystanders, this is our story, and we fall under its judgment.

On this particular day of Good Friday, I expect that we have our eyes trained on the cross, and on the innocent man hanging there. But soon enough our attention will need to move on to the next thing, and competing priorities will arise, and decisions will need to be made with expediency, and even as we try to do the right thing, soon enough we will find ourselves in the courtyard again shouting “crucify him,” or gambling over the few possessions he has left. We know we will; he knows we will.

It is of the utmost importance then, that this first of the last words of Jesus—that word of forgiveness—comes before the recognition by the soldiers or anybody else of the need for forgiveness. It comes

even before the awareness of judgment. Before the awareness comes that even in the common and mundane things of our lives we still finds ways of persisting in sin; that cruelty can creep into our everyday amusements; that injustice can infect even our better intentions.

Good Friday is our story. Therefore we value this first word—Father, forgive them—because it is our hope. If we believe that the prayers of the Son are heard by the Father, then this is the good news: that as he is on the cross, crucified, Christ intercedes for us, prays for us, even before we come to the terrible realization of our need for it. He loved us first, Saint John says (1 John 4:19). Even when we were still sinners, and he the victim of our sinfulness. He loved us, then, and prayed for us, then. Father forgive us, for Jesus' sake.

THE SECOND WORD

“Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.”

Saint Luke 23:43

The Reverend Joel C. Daniels, Ph.D.

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” But the other answering rebuked him, saying, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.” And he said unto Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” And Jesus said unto him, “Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

Jesus spent his last hours on earth in the presence of criminals. All four gospels say so, even if, with all that documentation, we still know neither their names, nor the specifics of their crimes, though they are at this point the most spoken-of criminals in history.

Jesus said of his persecutors, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do,” but at least one person there does recognize the full import what is happening. After the first criminal derides Jesus, mocks him, by saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Of course you aren’t. If you were, you would save yourself, and you would save us,” the second criminal interrupts him. “Do you not fear God? You and I are being punished, as we should be; but this man has done nothing wrong.” It is then that he addresses Jesus: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

It is a brief conversation but nonetheless profound. The second criminal makes the association between Jesus’ innocence and Jesus’ being the Messiah, and between his being the Messiah and his being the king. And he seems to say that if the first criminal would acknowledge that Jesus was innocent, then he would make that

connection too: that Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of Israel, the son of David, who has been sent by God to establish a new kingdom.

If that is what he is saying, then this second criminal is revealed as an incredibly insightful student of the scriptures and perhaps the first truly to understand the relationship between this death and God's kingdom.

He isn't, of course, the first person to claim that Jesus is the Messiah. But it's one thing to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and king when all of the momentum—political and social and religious—is moving in his direction. But it's quite another to make those claims when the hopes of those people have been dashed. To be on the cross was not the expected fate of the messiah and king. You can understand why people would decide that Jesus is like a prophet who has been revealed as false. A hope that disappoints. A promise not kept. A potential unfulfilled. The first criminal was merely repeating the conventional wisdom.

For some reason this second criminal sees what others do not: he sees in the innocent Jesus the true fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies. Was the second criminal remembering Isaiah, there on the cross? Isaiah on the suffering servant: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows ... wounded ... oppressed ... afflicted ... a lamb to the slaughter" (53:4-7). The penitent criminal interprets the prophecies differently, and so he interprets Jesus differently. He says to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom. Remember me when your kingship is in hand, when victory is indeed yours, which I believe will come, even if no one else does." He makes this courageous proclamation of faith at a time when only faith would enable that.

Jesus makes him a promise. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom," the second criminal says—but what kingdom? Time has run out, after all. Jesus gives him an assurance: I am the king, and my kingdom is paradise. And, after all this has passed, you will be there with me.

This may be even in excess of the hope that the penitent criminal held. To live in a redeemed kingdom of Israel, blessed among nations, that is a good thing. But it is more than that, Jesus seems to be saying. The kingdom of which I am king is paradise, and you will be there with me. Jesus promises him at the most desolate moment possible that on the other side of his death will be life with God forever, which is Paradise. But before that can happen, they both must go through the valley of the shadow of death. The criminal must go, and Jesus must go, too. “Today you will be with me in paradise,” he says, but the day isn’t over yet. Death must be confronted. It must even be allowed, for now, to win. It must be allowed to exercise its kingship, its dominion, as the unavoidable truth that haunts all created existence. The criminal, and Jesus, must plunge into the blackness of death. There is a journey still to go. The day isn’t over yet.

There is another day coming. And, on that day, those like the penitent thief, who have found their refuge in the open arms of Christ, will find themselves welcomed into paradise.

However, I am nagged by a loose end here, in this story, and that is the matter of the first criminal. With the faithful one squared away, headed for paradise, there remains the issue still outstanding of the one who railed against Jesus, the one who mocked him, the one traditionally depicted as being on his left hand, the goat to the first criminal’s sheep. Jesus didn’t speak the second word on the cross to him. About him, and about his fate, the text is silent. That unrepentant criminal remains the unresolved issue in this story.

With his attitude and actions toward Jesus, however, things aren’t looking very good for him. We see in him, at the very hour of his death, one whose dying sin condemns him, putting him completely at risk for damnation, with no death-bed conversion to depend upon. In his final acts on earth, we see one who will never be able to say that he has lived the kind of faithful life that has secured him a place in paradise. At this critical moment in his life—the moment when he must proclaim his faith, or not—he fails the test, spectacularly. At that critical moment, he becomes completely vulnerable to the wrath of God’s judgment, having rejected the person who is the means of

his salvation. As his breath leaves him, and he also enters the kingdom of death, he has nothing to commend himself, nothing to protect him, and becomes the very image of a soul in peril.

The first criminal, the loose end in an otherwise consoling story, becomes the one who must be entirely dependent on a gift—a gift of God’s grace. That, or damnation. The goat on the left hand becomes the one for whom Jesus’ first word, his intercession—“Father forgive them”—that prayer is either going to be efficacious for him, or it is not. Either Jesus is going to come to his undeserved rescue, or he is not. There is no third option for him. Ultimately, we don’t know what happens to him. We can hope. But we don’t know. There are no guarantees, and the text is silent.

I confess that I identify with the unresolved issue that is the first criminal, more than I can identify with the inspiring faith and insightful scriptural interpretation of the second criminal. I know myself to be more like the one who is at great risk; the one without rights; the one who fails important tests, spectacularly. So if there is any hope for that first criminal, or for me—and we don’t know for sure if there is—if there is any hope, it will come from the mediation of Jesus, or it simply will not come at all. No third option.

Today, the penitent criminal will be with Jesus in paradise. And the first criminal, and me? Our souls in peril? With nowhere else to go, we can do nothing but pray for God’s mercy, and hope for his grace.

THE THIRD WORD

“Woman, behold thy son! . . . Behold thy mother!”

Saint John 19:25-27

The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock, M.Div.

In order to better contemplate what Jesus is doing by commending his Mother and his disciple John to one another's care, I would have us leave Golgotha for a moment, and return to the Garden of Eden, to a time before human sin, and its consequences. Before the first sin, humankind lived in a world where there was no injury to their relationships both human and divine. During that time of freedom and peace, it was God's habit to walk in the garden in the cool of the day. That is not to say that God had a body and walked around like Adam and Eve did, rather, his voice was what moved through the garden. This is the voice with which God spoke words which brought all things into being. Saint John taught us that the word that was in the beginning, by which all things have their being, became flesh and dwelt among us.

We have also been taught that the doctrine of the Trinity, One God in three persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is implicit throughout scripture from the beginning to the end. In the beginning, the Father created, the Spirit hovered over the waters, and might we say that the voice who moved through the garden was the word walking through the garden in the cool of the day. Though not incarnate in the beginning, was it Jesus whom Adam and Eve were accustomed to meeting in the garden?

But this era of peace and freedom and congress with God did not last, because our first parents did sin, and their first sin, like every one committed since did injury to their self, to their relationship with one another, and to their relationship with God.

“And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the

presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?"
Gen 3.8-9

The relationship between humans and their relationship with God has been damaged such that a sad progression is set in motion, a progression that Father Daniels helped make clear for me not long ago. When Adam and Eve sin, there is still an intimate conversation to be had, questions to be asked, excuses to be made, but truth to be told between God and man. When Eve gives birth to her firstborn, her first words are to acknowledge the source of this life; God has given me a child. But when that child grows up to kill his younger brother, and God comes calling, there is still a conversation, a proximity to God, but now lies and cruel jokes pass are on the lips of man even in the face of their creator. When Cain's own son, grows up to kill a man, God doesn't come calling at all, and there is only to be found boasting on the lips of man. It was sometime after this that humans began to call upon the name of the Lord. They called across a great distance, a distance of their own making.

One indicator of the extent of that damage and that distance is that in all the rest of scripture, only two people are ever likened as friends of God.

God, speaking through his servant Isaiah, says, "But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. Isa 41.8 Saint James explains this when he writes, "And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God." Jas 2.23

When Moses interceded for the people of Israel, he went alone into the tent of meeting, behind the veil, "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend." Ex 33.11 When Moses died his epitaph read in part, "and there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face." Deut 34.10

Scripture is a sad record of our anemic relationship to God. There are many, many people, several servants, and some prophets, there are

even a handful of kings who did what was right in the sight of the Lord, but out of all that only two friends.

But God wants more than friends, so he had a son, a child of his very own. When the word became flesh and dwelt among us he began to repair all that damage, the damage to ourselves, the damage we do to one another, and to breach the divisions between God and man. Jesus did not begin this work on the cross, he began it in the streets, and in the homes of people, in their synagogues, at their watering places, in the country and in the city, wherever people gathered, Jesus began teaching them, and he started slow, but he started a progression that found its fulfillment on the cross.

Many of Jesus' parables have to do with the relationship between servants and their masters. And Jesus taught his disciples to have this spirit of servanthood amongst them. "Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" Matt 20.25-28

And Jesus very pointedly commends this kind of servanthood to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion by washing his disciple's feet and by saying, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you...If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

But I ask you, was this the relationship that God was seeking with humans when he first made us? Did he want a race of servants? Is this what Jesus is working out for us on the cross? By no means.

Still later in the evening of his last supper with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all

things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.”
John 15.12-15

Was this the kind of relationship that God was seeking with humans when he first made us? Did he want a race of friends? Is this what Jesus is working out for us on the cross? By no means.

Still another time, while he was speaking to some people, Jesus’ mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Matt 12.46-50

And after the resurrection, when Mary Magdalene encounters the resurrected Lord in the garden, Jesus said to her, “Touch me not... but rather go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.” John 20.17 And if that were not clear enough, in the very first chapter of John’s gospel, he wrote, “But to all who received [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of the will of God.” John 1.12-13

When Jesus commends his disciple John to his Mother Mary’s care, this is nothing short of an outward and visible sign of what is being wrought inwardly and invisibly by Jesus on the cross. Jesus is not making a race of servants, not a race of friends, but constituting a new human family with God as its father, Jesus as its son, the Holy Spirit as its mediator, and we humans as brothers and sisters to Jesus and to one another. By God’s good grace, Jesus fashions us into a family and one outward sign of our new relationship to him, and to God is his words from the cross.

When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.

THE FOURTH WORD

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

Saint Matthew 27:46

The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock, M.Div.

It has been said by those who are familiar with crucifixion that the thing that made them particularly gruesome was the screaming, “the screams of rage and pain, the wild curses and the outbreaks of nameless despair of the unhappy victims.” The thieves on the cross exemplify this.

We read that one of the two thieves which were hanged railed on him... Luke 23.39 and the other thief, railed against his compatriot. But the screams of the thief on Jesus’ left and on his right were just competing voices in what must have been a horrific clamor.

Women, his own mother in particular, weeping at the foot of the cross, soldiers shooting dice for his clothes, priests yelling up at Jesus to come down if he was who he said he was, others shushing them and interpreting to others the few words that Jesus did utter from the cross. Laughing, cursing, spitting, babbling, weeping, railing, the incessant wagging of the human tongue, words, piled upon words, piled upon words, but the one quarter from which Jesus must long to hear even a single word, is deathly silent. The one voice that could rend the heavens and shush this rabble, the one voice that might declare, this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased, or I have glorified you my child and I will glorify you again, where is that voice, now in the hour of his own child’s death... silence, in the face of the caterwauling crowd.

Maybe at first, it was bearable, not the pain, it goes without saying that would make any man scream out of his head, it’s the clamor that Jesus might have endured for a while, the mocking, the yelling, the reviling. This being Jesus’ hour, this being the reason he came down

from heaven, this being the reason he went up to Jerusalem, this being the hour of his bloodshed which would blot out the sins of the whole world, this being the hour to accomplish the salvation of the world, this would surely be the hour his Father would speak, any moment now, any moment now, as these hours passed, the rabble railed as much as any man could stand, and then that other awful silence, louder than the crowd, till...Jesus can't stand it anymore. Eli, Eli, that is to say, my God, my god, why has thou forsaken me?

These words from the psalms of David are a cry that seeks to cover a great distance. The awful distance that Jesus feels has been fixed between him and his father, till his Father doesn't seem so fatherly anymore and is just God. These words say more than just God, why have you forsaken me, but continue to say, why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my crying? At the moment of Jesus' most extreme suffering, why has God drawn farther away rather than closer to Jesus?

Once, well beyond shouting distance from Golgotha, Jesus went to visit a family in Bethany with whom he was friends, two sisters and their brother. Only the brother was dead three days by the time Jesus arrived. Jesus asked to be shown the tomb and then, over the objections of those nearby, commanded that the stone covering the opening be rolled away. Standing outside the tomb, Jesus spoke softly to his Father, who he felt was very near to him and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." John 11.41-44

How distant did Lazarus' sisters feel from their brother when he lay in that tomb? How far did Lazarus feel that he was from the land of the living? It must have seemed an unsurpassable distance over which Jesus cried out, but not so far that Lazarus didn't hear, was roused from his grave and crossed over from death to life and to the sound of Jesus' voice. Jesus said it would be like this.

“He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live... Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear my voice, And shall come forth.” John 5.24-29

The hour is coming, that hour Jesus spoke of so often, this hour, the hour of his death. And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. Matt 27.50-53

I can say this to you because of the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and wait for the coming of the Lord shall not go ahead of those who have already died. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. 1 Thess 4.14-16

When Jesus hangs on the cross, he cries out with loud cries, to a God who may very well have withdrawn for time, but if God did withdraw, perhaps it is because he desires Jesus to shout, to cry out with a loud voice, to scream if needs be, across a great and seemingly unsurpassable distance, so that the living, and even the dead in their graves may hear the good news of their coming salvation.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

THE FIFTH WORD

“I thirst.”

Saint John 19:28

The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

After [Jesus put his mother into John's care as a new family, saying "Woman, behold thy son!" and to John, "Behold thy mother!"], Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, it is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.

In the beginning, when God created the heaven and the earth, there was only water, water without direction or dimension, water up and water down, water everywhere, except there was no up or down, no place, no direction, no distinction. Water is the Bible's picture for chaos, for the formless reality (which is hardly worth calling a "reality") out of which everything came. The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the water, and the Word of God spoke. "Let there be light," and there was light. And the Word of God spoke. "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters," to separate water from water, to pull water back, to make a place and to put water into that place. God pulled the water back and there was dry land, and out of the dry land sprang grass, and herbs, and trees, all of them alive, all of them producing seed from which would come to be more grass and more herbs and more trees.

Somewhat later, out of the waters of the sea, God brought into being living things. Some of them swam in the sea. Others flew over the dry ground. And out of the earth itself God created other living creatures, things that creep upon the ground and things that graze upon it, and finally the human being. All these were made male and

female, to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth that he had first created by pulling back the waters of the formless chaos.

. . . So goes the story God has given us about our origins. It tells us two things. First, that water alone is dangerous and unformed. Lest we miss that point, our story includes an episode of a flood, God letting loose the waters above the firmament when it was his purpose to return things to their primordial, unformed, pure water state. Alone, water is fearful. But also (the second point): we never completely leave water behind. Water is around us for our good: the rain that nourishes the earth, the seas and rivers that border our lands and which supply food for us to eat, and the fountains and wells and other waters that give us drink.

In the universe at large, science has taught us, water is exceedingly rare, but on this our planet, water covers some 70% of the surface, and in these our bodies, water constitutes some 90% of what we are. Human beings are never far away from water.

And that is why we are never far away from thirst.

You could probably live for a number of weeks without food—perhaps not many weeks, but still some weeks. But you could not live even one week without water. When the body does not take in water, a number of its systems cease working. Death is often just around the corner; and in fact every day people die of dehydration, the lack of water. To be a member of the human species, that two-legged animal that dwells on the land that is surrounded by seas and rivers and overhung by the heaven that holds aloft those other waters, to be a human being is to be always enveloped, but not overwhelmed, by water.

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By this time on Good Friday, Jesus has been hanging on the cross for about four or five hours. He will die shortly—after six hours altogether—and it is remarkable that Jesus dies so quickly. Other victims of the torture of crucifixion held out for a day or even days, piercing the air with their screams of agony. Some think that, medically speaking, Jesus died more quickly than others because of (it

is thought) a significant loss of blood even before he got to the cross, when his bare, innocent body had been flagellated. And there on the cross he was exposed. Of course he was dehydrated.

Jesus was fully human, and to be human is to be a two-legged animal dwelling on the land that is surrounded by the sea and overhung by the firmament, an animal on the Earth which is the precious planet drawn out from the waters of chaos by God who gives it its being. To be human is to be in need of continual rehydration. We are ever drying out, we humans, and to live we must drink. “I thirst,” says Jesus on the cross, and saying so (although he is saying much more than this) Jesus is saying he is really human. You may be thirsty as you sit in the pew right now. I am thirsty as I speak to you. Jesus is thirsty on the cross: he is human, he is dying, he thirsts. The Psalm that begins “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” goes on to describe dying from thirst: the Psalmist says his mouth is [quote] “dried up like a potsherd, my tongue cleaveth to my gums” (22:16 [BCP 22:15]). It was assuredly that way with Jesus.

But he is also the Word of God. As such, as the Word, it was *Jesus* who said, “Let there be light,” *Jesus* who called for the dry land to appear, *Jesus* who let the animals cover the earth, and *Jesus* who said Let us make man in our image. Whenever it is written in the Bible “God said,” we need to remember that God’s Word is Jesus. Thus it is Jesus who created the situation in which we humans come out of water and are surrounded by water without being destroyed by it. That is to say, it is Jesus who creates the situation in which thirst is possible. The Jesus who says on the cross that he thirsts is also the Jesus who creates the water that quenches thirst.

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So the question is not only whether Jesus as a human being thirsts. The question is, does Jesus as the Word of God thirst?

Saint John suggests as much, when he says that this word, “I thirst,” was spoken to *that the scripture might be fulfilled*. This would be an active thing, not the suffering of thirst that comes upon the dying person, but a reaching out to thirst that is done actively for a purpose. Jesus, the Word of God, reaches out in order to achieve thirst. For Jesus

the Word of God to thirst is an accomplishment. It is the fulfilment of all things, indeed, the fulfilment of scripture.

Jesus' thirst fulfills scripture as a whole. Jesus came to do his Father's will, which was to bring about a relationship of love between God and human beings. In the famous words of Saint John: "So God loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). When he came close to his final Passover, John writes, "Jesus knew that his hour had come . . . that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God" (13:1,3). He knew he would lay down his life—that it would not be taken away from him. Jesus as the Word of God *allows* himself to be crucified, *allows* his body to come to its end, for a profound reason. Namely, that all his life he has thirsted to do this, his Father's will. Does Jesus regret the cup that is given to him, does he wish that it pass him by? Not according to Saint John. He tells us that Jesus, when arrested, commanded Peter to sheathe his sword. He said: "Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?"

He thirsts to drink the cup his Father has given him.

Jesus thirsts to make it possible for us to respond to God's love with love, for us to become friends of God. On the eve of his death he says to his disciples, "I have called you friends." And friends in the deepest sense, he says, are people who would lay down their lives for each other. Jesus thirsts to be our friend, which means he thirsts to lay down his life for us.

Let me end this meditation with a question that an author recently put to me. "Is there anyone you would die for?" If you have a spouse, would you die for him, for her? Is there a child you would die for? A friend? Is there anyone? It is hard to imagine, and perhaps painful to take self-inventory, because our capacity for self-absorption really does seem infinite. But maybe, maybe, there really is someone I would die for, someone for whom I could really be a friend.

Jesus thirsted because he was a human being dying. Jesus thirsted because he was God's Word who wanted to make it possible for us to be his friends. And he accomplished his thirst when he died.

THE SIXTH WORD

“It is finished.”

Saint John 19:30

The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

With this “word,” we come to the last of Jesus’ words from the cross passed on to us by the evangelist John. “It is finished.” Jesus has nothing else to do.

This may be the hardest word of them all to believe. Nothing that Jesus has said up to this point particularly strains our imagination. That Jesus showed mercy to his persecutors, that he comforted the man we know as the “good thief” who was crucified with him, that he created new family from the cross, that he screamed in the agony of Godforsaken-ness, and that he thirsted: these are not only believable, they are sayings that we can picture ourselves making also. We want to be able to forgive people the sins that they have committed against us; we want to be able to offer comfort to others, to arrange care for people whom we have to leave behind. And one can imagine that way-down feeling that God has gone out of my world. And one can certainly identify with thirsting. So all these earlier words are imaginable in some way, and I think it is for that reason that it seems possible to imagine Jesus saying all these things, even on the cross, even under the extreme pain of those his final hours. But Jesus doesn’t say only those things. He also says, “It is finished.”

And this is very hard to imagine.

And the reason is (and I’ll speak just for myself) I cannot imagine what it is for a life to be finished. Every life that I know, or through reading and study and a general awareness of the world know of, is an unfinished life. A few years ago this church was packed with people mourning the deaths of three children. Their earthly lives

were unfinished—although, tragically, they were also ended. I think of people of middle age who have died suddenly, or died after a long illness. Their earthly lives have ended, but they were not finished. And I think I would say the same even for my grandmother who died in her 90s.

In fact, apart from Jesus (and we'll get to that in a moment), I don't know that I can imagine a finished life, a complete life, a life that has a shine and polish to it, a life with a "finished" quality. For there seems always to be something else that could have been done.

We say to one another: "Take care of your unfinished business before it's too late!" There are people we love but maybe we haven't told them so. And there are works of love that we have not done. And there are apologies we have not made. We keep doing things that are wrong, keep needing to say "I'm sorry," and not finishing the work.

Thus we will come to the end of our life and we won't be finished. How then could Jesus say that his life was finished? Of course, Jesus had no sin, so he didn't have unfinished business of that sort, but in all those other senses, how could his life be finished? Was there not for Jesus still more to do?

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis has a bit of fun with a certain kind of clergyman of his day—the sort of cleric (in the story he's a bishop) who is always raising questions about the articles of the creed and raising doubts about points of doctrine, the sort of bishop who sees himself as free-thinking and who, if he writes the right kind of books, will get himself featured in the press and other media. There wasn't the "Today" show back then, but if there had been, this bishop would have been on it. He lives in hell, although he can't quite see that it is hell, and he thinks it a bit profane to speak the word. But down in the grey town where he lives there is a little theological society. And the bishop is going to present a paper to their next meeting. The paper is going to be about Jesus, about the tragedy of Jesus having died so young. You see, the bishop plans to say, if "our Lord" had only lived longer, he would have had time to grow out of his narrow opinions! Jesus' views, he thinks, would have

evolved and he would have become much more broad-minded! I suppose we might imagine this broad-minded Jesus saying not “I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me,” but rather, “Hey, there are lots of ways to find enlightenment.”

This is a bit of fun on C. S. Lewis’s part, although not without elements of the absurd. But don’t miss the point: that bishop in the story did not believe that Jesus’ life was tragic because he was killed; he thought it was tragic because he died so young. In his view, the tragedy of Jesus’ death on the cross was that Jesus was not finished.

It is not an uncommon sin—an intellectual sin, and a sin of the heart—to wish that Jesus were wrong, to wish that Jesus’ life were not finished. Jesus healed, and he taught, and he made disciples. There are still a lot of sick people: if only Jesus’ life were not finished, he could heal them also! In comparison with all the literature of the world, the Bible has only a few pages of Jesus’ teaching; wouldn’t it be better if his life were not finished so that he could be teaching us more things! And if Jesus’ life were not finished, he would still be here, and then, we think, it would be much easier to be his disciple.

The problem is, we don’t grasp what Jesus’ life was for: and so we don’t grasp why it is finished.

“Martha, Martha,” Jesus once said, “thou art so full of care and troubled about so many things!” [cf. Lk 10:41] And may I say, O People of New York! You are so full of care about so many things! Your life does not hang together as one life, and that is why it is never finished.

It seems to me that instead of there being one thread that runs through our life, each of our lives is a multiplicity of threads. And when we come to the end of our life, none of those threads is finished. They just come to an end, and what one has, is just a bunch of unfinished threads. We have skills we haven’t developed, opportunities we have squandered, tasks and projects that are only half-carried-through. We are finite, and the possibilities for our life seem infinite, while our sins are a heavy weight that causes us to drag.

But Jesus' life was finished. There was a thread to his life and it reached its completion. He did everything he needed to do.

So what was Jesus' life for? Although he healed many people, the purpose of his life was not to eliminate sickness. Although he taught, the purpose of his life was not to bring everyone to wisdom. Although he made disciples, the purpose of his life was not to make everyone his disciple.

The purpose of Jesus' life was to be obedient to the Father. Jesus was completely obedient to his Father's will. The Father sent the Son into the world to live a complete human life, from his conception in Mary's womb to his last breath. This life of the Son was to be perfect, without blemish, and so he lived without sin. But since sin is always a lessening of our humanity, to live without sin is just another way of saying to live in a completely human way. In complete obedience to his Father, he drew people to himself, healing and teaching and making disciples. In doing so, he incarnated love. But in a world of sin, if you live by love, your life becomes a sort of contradiction to the world. And so you end up like this—on the cross.

That's the single thread of Jesus' life, and that is why the story of his life unfolds both fittingly and surprisingly—fulfilling, if I may so put it, Aristotle's definition of a true narrative. It is surprising that Jesus dies willingly, and surprising, at the end, that he says "It is finished." But then we discover that the end of his life fits everything that went before, and makes sense of the whole trajectory, from the angel Gabriel's announcement, to his birth, his youth, his adult life, his forming disciples and teaching and healing, his betrayal, his condemnation, his flagellation, the mockery, the spitting, the nails, the torture, and then: "It is finished."

My life and yours have lots of meanings, lots of loose threads, and because our lives mean so many things they risk ending up not meaning anything at all. But Jesus' life has one meaning—it only needs one meaning—and thus his life is a beautiful story, a complete story, something finished. *He saved the world.* If you think of Jesus as a good man, his life is unfinished. If you think of him as a healer and a

teacher, his early death is a tragedy. If you think of him as the obedient Son of God, it is beautiful and true.

A personal note. Over most of the past year I was writing about my wife, who died a few years ago at an age much older than Jesus', but still to my thinking much too soon. That memoir is now—well, shall I say, “It is finished”? It has come to an end, I have written that last page, but is it finished? Indeed, shall I say of Susan's life, “It is finished”? I pray God it is so, but if it is so, it is only because her life has been hidden in Christ's. “For ye are dead,” it says in the Epistle to the Colossians, “but your life is hid with Christ in God” [3.3]. And Christ's life is finished.

If you want to have a completed life, a life that makes sense, a life about which it might be said at the end, “It is finished,” there is only one way. And that is to be born in Jesus, to live in Jesus, and to hide away your own future death in his. The story of your life needs to be tied up with the story of his. Our lives might, please God, come to be finished and not just come to an end, by becoming part of his life: for Jesus is the one true human being, who came to the end of it all and pronounced truthfully: It is finished.

THE SEVENTH WORD

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

Saint Luke 23:46

The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

When Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

We come at last to the end of it all, the end of our three hours' vigil here at the cross, the end of the three hours of darkness, the end of Jesus' hanging there upon the wooden tree, the end of Jesus' life. While Saint Mark and Saint Matthew emphasize the Godforsakenness of Jesus on the cross, and while Saint John emphasizes the cross as the victory of a person who through it all is at one with his Father, Saint Luke shows us how Jesus on the cross is *for us*. Jesus has “surety” on the cross [Brown, *Death*, 1049; and generally for exegetical claims below]. We can turn to this Jesus. He will show us the way. He will be there for us. This Jesus is showing us how to die.

The words that Jesus says come from a Psalm: *into thy hands I commend my spirit*. It's Psalm 31. Here is how it begins:

In thee, O Lord, have I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion; deliver me in thy righteousness.

Bow down thine ear to me; make haste to deliver me.

And be thou my strong rock, and my castle: be thou also my guide, and lead me for thy Name's sake.

(Note the emphasis on leading. This Psalm is about God leading us; in Jesus, it is about the Father leading him; and by example, it is about Jesus leading us.)

Draw me out of the net that they have laid privily (secretly) for me; for thou art my strength.

Into thy hands I commend my spirit; for thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of truth.

Psalm 31 goes on—it's not a short psalm—to express the weakness, the beaten-down-ness, of the psalmist. He complains of being forgotten, and has the sense that God has not come through with his promises to help him. So it comes close to *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*, the cry from the cross that Matthew and Mark record Jesus saying, which itself comes from Psalm 22. But Psalm 31 exhibits throughout a sure confidence that God will come through, that he will deliver this beaten-down psalmist whose hope is in God—a God whose goodness, he says, is plentiful.

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit, says Jesus from the cross. He quotes Psalm 31 but he adds the word “Father.” For Jesus, God is always “Father,” even, according to Saint Luke, when Jesus is on the cross. Three of the seven last words come from Luke, and two of these, the first and the last, are prayers to the Father. *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.* It is beyond all wonder to see Jesus full of such mercy for those who are killing him. And then, *Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.* Jesus thus leaves the world speaking to his Father, and we might remember that his first reported words upon coming into the world were words of his Father. It was back when he was a boy, and his parents took him to Jerusalem for the feast, and unbeknownst to them he stayed behind in Jerusalem. When at last they found him in the temple and told him they had been looking for him anxiously, he said that he had to be in his Father's house, doing his Father's business. So God was “Father” for Jesus from his first words to his last. As he came into this world to do his Father's business, so when it was finished he commended his spirit into his Father's hands.

He says, *into thy hands.* The word “hands” is a pliant metaphor. Last month my mother was telling me a story from her youth on an Oklahoma farm. This was some 70 years ago when farming was much less the mechanized operation that it is today, and she was

speaking of people hired to go out into the fields and hoe the weeds so that the crops would grow, and how even as a teenager she would be supervising them. They were called hands, “hired hands.” So there’s one sense of the word. We also speak of passing into someone else’s hands. We can relinquish control of something and place it with someone else. Even more, we can relinquish control of ourselves, and turn ourselves over to someone else. One can pass into the hands of the law, and end up in jail. One can pass into the hands of a surgeon, and enter into unconsciousness.

Into thy hands, Jesus says. Just a short time before the day of Jesus’ death, he told a parable about a vineyard let out to some wicked tenants. Hearing this, “the chief priests and the scribes,” who realized the parable was spoken against them, “sought to lay hands” on Jesus [Lk 20.19]. Earlier, Jesus himself had used the word, saying he would be “delivered into the hands of men” [Lk 9.44]. And while he was, as we say, “handed over” to men, and while the chief priests and the scribes did indeed lay hands on him, there remained a surety with Jesus, such that wicked and grasping hands were not the last hands. Hands bound him, hands whipped him, hands nailed him, but other hands, his Father’s hands, received him.

Father, Jesus says, *into thy hands I commend my spirit*. Jesus is turning himself over to his Father, but in doing so he uses the word “spirit.” Now “spirit” has an ordinary meaning, something like “the living self or life power” [so Brown, 1068, who, also, for the following]. But in Jesus’ case, it also means the Holy Spirit. Here again we go back to the beginning. Jesus came into the world, was conceived in the womb of Mary, by the agency of God’s Spirit. As the angel said to Mary: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee.” God’s Spirit, the Holy Ghost, brought Jesus into the world. That same Spirit fell upon Jesus at his baptism, and has been his spirit throughout his life. Now Jesus gives the Spirit, which is his spirit, back to the Father; it is the means by which Jesus hands himself over to the Father.

We come to the end, but please do not fail to see: there is something here for Christians to learn. That is to say, the details of Jesus’ final hours and death are not accidents. These are not mere facts about the death of an important person, the way one might read about and

remember the death of Socrates, say, or the death of Martin Luther King; nor are they mere facts about the death of a beloved person, the way your mother might tell you how her grandmother died, or your friend might tell you about how his wife died. The details of Jesus' death are not accidents, not mere facts; they are, rather, *for us*. They are there for us to be strengthened, that we might grasp onto the surety with which Jesus died.

It has been so even from that day. The first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen, was stoned to death. His body bruised, broken, bloody, he looked up from the earth and prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" [Acts 7:60]. Stephen begged God to forgive the people who were killing him, just as Jesus had done. In his death, Stephen took hold of Jesus' surety.

And in a sense it is with us every day. From time immemorial, people have noted that a single day of our life is a picture of our whole life in miniature. We awaken from sleep, that mysterious state that is something like being in the womb; awakening is like being born. We go with whatever strength we have through the day, and then we are tired, even as in the normal course of things one grows in strength into adulthood and then, ultimately, passes into a weaker stage of later life. Finally we return to bed and fall asleep, as at the end we will, finally, die (which is also called "falling asleep"). Each day of our life is a picture of our whole life. And every night, when we fall asleep, we know not for sure that we will awaken.

Psalm 31, the verse spoken by Jesus as his last word and our last word today, has found its way into the night prayers of many Christians, for instance, in the service known as Compline. You could say this word yourself tonight, as you stretch out horizontal, and your head hits the pillow, and you pull the sheets around you: *Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.*

. . . She had been unconscious for about three weeks, and those in whose hands her body was placed wanted to perform a tracheotomy. Not knowing if she could hear the words, her husband stroked her head and leaned close to her ear. "It will be all right," he said. And then an old prayer from childhood rose to his lips. "Now I lay me

down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” He paused, not knowing if he dared to continue. “If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

He’s showing us how to do it: *Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.*



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