

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

THE REVEREND CANON CARL F. TURNER, RECTOR



“One **OF** us, One **FOR** us:
A cancer patient reflects on the Seven Last Words from the Cross.”

THE VERY REV'D CANON STEVEN A. PEAY, PHD

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2020



The Very Rev. Steven A. Peay, PhD, FBS

Fr. Peay was Interim Canon to the Ordinary in the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee and Associate Dean of All Saints' Cathedral, Milwaukee. Steven joined the Cathedral staff in 2018 after serving as Professor of Homiletics and Church History and Dean-President at Nashotah House Theological Seminary. A Church historian, with a specialization in the history of preaching and the American Church, his work at All Saints' focuses on spiritual formation. He remains Dean-President Emeritus of the Seminary.

Fr. Peay's undergraduate study of Church history led him toward Benedictine monastic life at St. Vincent Archabbey at Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1977. After his first profession of vows he studied for the priesthood. He was ordained deacon in 1981 and priest in 1982.

He was assistant professor of homiletics and historical theology at St. Vincent's. During his tenure at the seminary he also served as academic dean for five years. Leaving monastic life in 1994, he devoted himself to parish work for the next 15 years in Congregational churches in Wisconsin, while continuing to research, write, and teach in various venues.

Fr. Peay came to Nashotah House as adjunct professor of Church history in 2008 and was elected to the faculty in 2010. His orders were received in August 2010, and he is a priest of the Diocese of Milwaukee. In 2014, he was made Dean-President. During his tenure as dean and president, Father Peay worked closely with the corporate leadership of Nashotah on a new institutional governance structure. He also led a successful effort to preserve the seminary's accreditation, and laid the foundation for the next evaluation by the Association of Theological Schools. Fr. Peay raised more than \$7 million for the seminary's endowment, the largest fundraising effort in the history of Nashotah, and moved the institution closer to its goal of ensuring long-term financial viability.

Father Peay has been a good friend to Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue; these sermons, delivered during the COVID-19 lockdown and as he was recovering from treatment for cancer, are extremely poignant. Father Peay died on August 31, 2020. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

Good Friday, April 10, 2020

Introduction

I am speaking to you from my study at home in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. As we look to the Cross today, we come from different places, and live in a very different time. Still, the Cross, and our Lord's words from it, speak powerfully to us.

This devotion – the TRE ORE or THREE HOURS – is a relatively recent addition to the Church's devotional life. It is first attributed to a Jesuit priest, Alphonsus Messia, who initiated the service in the early 18th century, it reached Rome in 1788. It appears to have come to the United States with the Jesuits in St. Louis around 1818. Its popularity spread to other denominations, though it is now rarely observed among Roman Catholics. These three hours and seven 'words' give us an opportunity to think deeply on what God has done for us and they prepare us for a more focused participation in the Church's official celebration of the Lord's Passion. The late Raymond Brown, preeminent Biblical scholar of John's writings, tells us that the Passion gives us an opportunity to put ourselves in the places of those in the Passion narrative. Thus, I approach the Lord's 'Seven Last Words' from the angle of one who has not long ago completed radiation and chemotherapy treatment for a recurrence of oral cancer (and take this opportunity to ask you to bear with me, since my tongue is still recovering and my speech has been somewhat affected by it). So, I offer you – and to our Lord – "One OF us, One FOR us: A cancer patient reflects on the Seven Last Words from the Cross."

The First Word

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:34

Luke reminds us that God’s will; God’s desire is relationship. Sin, self-will, blocks relationship. And when I speak of ‘sin’ here, I am not talking about the normal laundry list of misdemeanors and peccadilloes that we call ‘sin,’ and in so doing trivialize or minimize it. Sin is about being out of harmony with God the Father’s will. Sin is the choice for self-will and self-centeredness that keeps us from living into God’s will and discovering the fullness of God’s will for us, which is union, oneness with the Godhead. Christ has come to restore that union; it is why he became one of us.

We all carry things inside ourselves, slights, real or imagined, memories of broken relationships, and anger. Often the person we most need to forgive is our self. We really cannot begin to extend forgiveness to others, not really, until we have managed to look deep inside ourselves, acknowledge our own brokenness, and forgive.

For many, Good Friday and Jesus’ offering on the Cross is an act of propitiation – an appeasement -- for an angry God. While it certainly has a propitiatory function, I don’t think the early Church saw the Cross in that way. The 20th century French archbishop spiritual writer Emile Guerry affirms this in his *GOD THE FATHER: MEDITATIONS*. He writes: “The Saviour’s Passion was not of necessity required for our redemption. Jesus’ acts had an infinite value in the eyes of the Father because they were those a Divine Person. Hence any one of the acts of the beloved Son would have been sufficient to re-establish the order broken by man’s sin. Yet the Father decided from all eternity that the Son should suffer the torments of the Passion. . . .Why? Undoubtedly because the sight of Christ’s sufferings and death on the Cross would bring home to us, far better than any reasonings, the whole horror of sin. There already we may see the hand of a Father prepared at all costs to deliver our souls from evil. But He wished to have it so also because we should there be deprived of any pretext for doubting of His Merciful Love.” [p. 70] Christ goes to the Cross to remind us just how broken the world is, and we are, and how much we need God’s love to be healed.

The 14th century anchoress/mystic Julian of Norwich had profound insight into how the Cross served to unite Christ with the pain of the human condition. Even more so, that union (she uses the term ‘oneing’) with us extends to the whole of the cosmos. Australian theologian Kerrie Hide puts this beautifully in her book *GIFTED ORIGINS TO GRACED FULFILLMENT*, “Bound to Christ by nature, we recognize him as Lord. Furthermore, creation in Christ unites humanity to all creation. This bond is such a great oneing that as Christ experiences the pain of the Passion it reverberates over the entire cosmos.” Still, what Julian sees is that “when our Lord appears, peace is taken and wrath has no place. For I saw no manner of wrath in God, neither for a short time, nor for long. For truly as to my sight, if God might be wroth a touch we should never have life nor stead nor being. . . . For we have our keeping in the endless goodness. . . . God to have forgiveness with a gracious desire of our salvation.” [p. 66] God’s desire for relationship, our being one with God, is what is expressed in Christ’s person, his life, and his death, because now God has taken humanity into God’s very self. God’s will is relationship. God’s desire is to forgive.

Etymology tells us that a patient is “one who suffers.” When I was diagnosed with cancer the first time, I wondered what I had done wrong to have this disease, why I had to suffer. That same strange thought came back with two subsequent diagnoses of cancer. In order to really deal with the disease, I had to learn to let those notions go, and if they even had validity at all, to forgive myself. I saw that as a patient I had to enter into my condition and not be mastered by it. I had read Siddhartha Mukherjee’s masterful book *THE*

EMPEROR OF ALL MALADIES: A BIOGRAPHY OF CANCER and realized that “beating” the disease could mean many things. What was important was understanding that I could be a patient, still not succumb to the disease, and remain open to what comes. In other words, I had to take on a forgiving attitude. It’s made a difference, at least that’s what my care team has told me.

For those of us who identify ourselves as Christians, ‘one of Christ’s,’ or ‘Christ followers,’ forgiveness should mark our daily life. Our Christian faith is about forgiveness. The powerful little prayer Jesus taught us, that so many of mumble through without really thinking what we’re saying, has as one of its important petitions, “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” When Jesus spoke his first word from the Cross, he was giving forgiveness to those who were neither interested in nor desirous of receiving it. Yet, he forgave them, because that is exactly what he came to do. He came to do the Father’s will, to open the way of union, to speak a word of invitation. So today we are invited to think upon the implication of his life, his teaching, his Passion and death, realizing that in them we are invited to join him in recreating the world in which we live. We are invited to help remake a world where forgiveness and reconciliation are the norm.

The Second Word

“Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise” Luke 24:43

What Luke portrays when Jesus speaks his second word lets us know just how great the distance was between Jesus and his persecutors. A teacher, a healer, innocent of any crime, save rankling the religious authorities, he is cruelly beaten, and now hung on a cross. He is mocked by those who once came to hear him, to seek a word, or perhaps a healing touch. And to add to it, he is flanked by two common criminals. Those who mock him, including one of the criminals, call for him to save himself. They may have heard him teach, but they did not understand his teaching. The one they mocked didn't teach that political liberation or the extension of human existence was the essence of salvation. Rather, his words and deeds testified to God's restoration of God's kingdom through faith, and the forgiveness of sins. It is a scene of stark, jarring contrasts.

Then Luke has the other criminal speak. He reminds his colleague that they deserve their punishment, but Jesus does not. He looks to Jesus and calls him by name, an act of familiarity that is only found one other place in Mark's Gospel, when the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, calls out to him for healing. He asks him to remember him when Jesus comes into his kingdom. And Jesus responds with a generosity that demonstrates exactly why he came, and what God is trying to do for humanity. He tells him, “Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” There's an old saying which asserts that the “good thief” stole paradise. It's not true. He didn't have to steal it; it was given to him.

Throughout his ministry Jesus identified with the marginalized, with the outcasts, with sinners. He walked among them. He ate with them. He taught them. Because they are God's poor. But in reality, all of us carry a bit of the outcast or marginalized in ourselves. Truly, we are all of us sinners, aren't we? And the good news that comes to us from the Cross is that God's generosity is FOR us. And that generosity isn't at some later date – it's today.

When one is going through treatment for cancer one becomes very conscious of the ‘today.’ In my case, the course of treatment was seven weeks of daily radiation treatments and chemotherapy in three-week intervals. Part of the daily round involved sitting in waiting rooms. Waiting for treatment. Waiting to see one's physicians. Waiting to get labs done. And while I waited, I had the opportunity to look around me, to observe my fellow patients, my fellow sufferers. I have read that the ill often feel pushed to the margins. Looking at the diverse group of folk at the cancer center, one could see that on some of the faces. Especially those of the younger folk who, no doubt, were wondering how they got there anyway. But one could also see it on the faces of those who had been there before, and for whom this had become an all-too-familiar part of life. Yes, going through those weeks I sometimes felt a bit marginalized. I was out of my lane, off my game, and had just become yet another ‘case.’

What I noticed, however, and indeed, felt it myself, was how being recognized could make a difference. I saw other patients' faces light up when a nurse or a therapist called them by name. And not just to let them know it was their turn, but to inquire how they were doing. That offering of a kind word, giving a smile, often changed the expression on a patient's face. I know it did mine. Such little acts of generosity do make a difference. They can be something of a taste of paradise, if you will. Acts of generosity offer the promise of acceptance, and the reminder that one is not alone, abandoned, or out of the mainstream.

What Jesus did for the “good thief” was to open him to the possibility of generosity, and to the hope of restoration. The fellow is nameless in the Gospel, but over the years he acquires a name, which changes depending on tradition, but in the West it is “Dismas.” His prayer – “remember me when you come into your

kingdom” – has become the prayer before receiving communion in the Eastern Churches’ eucharistic liturgy. It’s a beautiful prayer: “O Lord, I believe and profess that You are truly Christ, the Son of the living God, Who came into the World to save sinners, of whom I am the first. Accept me as a partaker of your mystical supper, O Son of God, for I will not reveal Your mysteries to your enemies, nor will I give you a kiss as did Judas, but like the thief will I confess to You. Remember me, O Lord, when You shall come into Your kingdom. Remember me, O Master, when You shall come into Your kingdom. Remember me, O Holy One, when You shall come into Your kingdom. May the partaking of your holy mysteries, O Lord, be not for my judgment, or condemnation, but for the healing of soul and body” Remember It’s important for us to remind ourselves that the word “remember” in Scripture means far more than a simple jogging of the memory, a recalling to mind. I think we see that in the prayer we just read, too. Rather, when God remembers, God acts. When the thief asked to be remembered he understood that – and received still more.

We are living in a strange, unsettling time. Despite our wealth, our scientific and medical acumen, and all of our technological ability we find ourselves under siege by a virus. This time calls for us to learn a lesson from this word of Jesus from the Cross. We are being reminded that Jesus lived, and taught us to live, generously. Even at a distance of six feet, we can offer a word of encouragement, or offer some sort of comfort. If we are mindful, we can discover just how many opportunities we have to act generously as Jesus did, today. Remember.

The Third Word

“Woman, behold thy Son! . . . Behold, thy mother!” John 19:25-27

One of the things I observed – experienced – during my treatment was how much I waited. No matter what I was there for – to see a doctor or for a treatment – there was a wait. Looking around I noticed how people waited. Some were clearly agitated by it (and sometimes let those around them know about it, whether they were there with them or not). Others sought to pass the time with a common jigsaw puzzle (they were in almost every waiting room, often with a hand sanitizer dispenser close by), others watched television, and some even napped. Many, like me, brought something to read. Waiting, no matter how you try to deal with it, still wears on one.

What must it have been like for Mary on that long-ago day? How many times had she waited on Jesus over the years? As she stood at the foot of the Cross, did she recall the days of anxiety when the 12-year-old Jesus disappeared on a trip to the Temple in Jerusalem, and was nowhere to be found on the way back to Nazareth. That wait must have been difficult. Perhaps she thought about that wedding feast in Cana when she let him know that the wine had run out. Did she recall the times she had sat off to the side listening to him teach, watching him heal people, or those times when he didn’t even seem to recognize his own family? Waiting takes a toll.

The waiting at the Cross was something entirely different, however. Now she stood there – often represented in sacred art – with eyes fixed on her crucified child. This teacher and bringer of hope she had brought into the world after the word of an angel, was now hung between thieves like a common criminal. What sort of wait must that have been? Still, she waited.

Then he spoke, bidding her to behold John the beloved as her son. She is now to embrace and nurture John as she had Jesus. And John was to see her as his mother, and to care for her. Emile Guerry says of this moment: “John in his single person stands for the human race. In becoming his mother Mary most truly becomes ours; because she entered from the depths of her soul into the oblation which brings us the Father’s pardon and the Son’s life.” [p 121] He echoes many of the Fathers, the great teachers of the early Church, like Ephrem the Syrian who say that in this moment we see the prefiguring of the Church, which will come to birth at Pentecost.

One of my favorite classical Anglican preachers and thinkers is Lancelot Andrewes, one of the Caroline Divines. He talks about the wonder of what God has done for us through Mary in his sermons on the Nativity, but it obtains here. He echoes Irenaeus, who talked about what God did in Christ as recapitulation, the regathering, reuniting of humanity with Divinity and opening us to what God created us to be: God’s image AND likeness. Andrewes shows us that by her very existence that the Word has become flesh and that God has entered the processes of birth and growth. Andrewes preached:

“For there we do not gather to Christ or of Christ, but we gather Christ Himself; and gathering Him we shall gather the tree and fruit and all upon it. For as there is a recapitulation of all in Heaven and earth in Christ, so there is a recapitulation of all in Christ in the holy Sacrament. You may see it clearly: there is in Christ the Word eternal for things in Heaven; there is also flesh for things on earth. Semblably, the Sacrament consisteth of a Heavenly and of a terrene [i.e. earthly] part, (it is Irenaeus’ own words); the Heavenly – there the word too, the abstract of the other; the earthly – the element.

And in the elements, you observe there is a fullness of the seasons of the natural year; of the corn-flour or harvest in the one, bread; of the wine-press or vintage in the other, wine. And in the heavenly, of the 'wheat-corn' whereto he compareth himself – bread, even 'the living Bread' (or 'Bread of life') 'that came down from Heaven'; the true Manna, whereof we may gather each his gomer. And again of him, the true Vine, as he calls himself – the blood of the grapes of that Vine. Both these issuing out of this day's recapitulation, both in *corpus autem aptasti mihi* (a body thou hast prepared for me) of this day. “

Mary's waiting upon Gabriel's word, her waiting through each day reminds us that every time we come to the Sacrament we are drawn again to our true abiding place, and our lives are once again taken up into the Lord's life. We are drawn closer and closer to where we are supposed to be – in union with God and living that way – and it all begins with waiting and a word at the foot of the Cross.

Over time waiting took on new meaning for me. It became an opportunity to see situations and people in a different way. Waiting can be an annoyance, but when we wait with our eyes on the Cross, on the wonder of God has done for us – and continues to do – it takes on new meaning.

We are now stuck in a wait, this time because of an unprecedented pandemic. Our lives, our country, our churches, are all waiting; waiting for the disease to pass and for us to return to normalcy. But will we? Will things ever be the same again?

Mary's wait shows us that we can experience – and live – in a transformed manner through our waiting. My waiting continues. Treatment is done, the tumors are gone, but healing is still going on. So, we wait, but realizing the wait bears fruit, and that makes the effort worthwhile. When Jesus speaks his third word to Mary and John, remember, we're included in it. We are all part of something larger, of the fruit of God's act of recapitulation in Christ, that is the Church, Christ's body. We may have to wait a while before we again receive the sacrament, but its effect is still with us – wait on it with longing. So now we wait, not only with a difference, but to make a difference.

The Fourth Word

“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46

The first time I was told I had cancer I was shocked, scared, and more than a bit in denial. Following surgery, I was clear of the disease, and remained that way for twelve years. Then to discover I had it again, this time a more aggressive form, I put on a brave face and, again, made it through surgery. After almost two years and following a visit to the oncologist that ended with “come back in six months,” this time it hit hard. I don’t think I said anything about being forsaken, but I certainly asked, “My God, WHY?”

Jesus had prayed that this cup might pass him on the night before. He offered words of comfort and forgiveness to others even in his agony. And now, he shows just how much he was one of us and cries out in anguish, “Why have you forsaken me?” These are Jesus’ last words in Matthew’s account of the Passion, and they’re drawn from Psalm 22.

There are those who want to minimize the suffering, because this is the second person of the blessed Trinity after all. However, to minimize or find some way to explain it away is to miss the point Matthew is trying to make. Jesus is as fully human as he is fully God. Thus, Gregory of Nazianzus would come to say, “That which is not assumed is not healed.” Jesus assumes it all, so that we might be healed.

Jesus became one OF us so that he could be one FOR us. The whole human experience is being gathered into God’s embrace in God’s taking flesh in Jesus so that we may come to know our rightful place in union with God. No one captured this better than Julian of Norwich when she wrote: “Here I saw a great unity [oneing] between Christ and us, as I understand it; for when he was in pain we were in pain, and all creatures able to suffer pain suffered with him. That is to say, all creatures which God has created for our service, the firmament and earth, failed in their natural functions because of sorrow at the time of Christ’s death, for it is their natural characteristic to recognize his as their Lord, in who all their powers exist. And when he failed, their nature constrained them to fail with him, insofar as they could, because of the sorrow of his sufferings. And so those who were his friends suffered pain because of love, and all creation suffered in general; that is to say, those who did not recognize him suffered because the comfort of all creation failed them, except for God’s powerful, secret preservation of them.” [Rev. 8]

In Christ it is not only the human condition, but the whole of creation that is led back into the fullness of union with God. This is why Paul talks about all of creation groaning as if in the pains of childbirth in Romans 8. Pain and suffering now receive new meaning. They are no longer exercises in futility. God in Christ know what we know and feels what we feel; we never, ever go through any pain, any suffering alone.

As I soon discovered in my most recent journey with cancer, my “why” is shared by many. Answers will come from many different angles, but one thing became certain – I need not despair. Jesus called upon his Father – “my God” – and while in agony he didn’t sever or lose the connection. Along the way as I underwent the treatments, I found more and more reason to see God at work in all that was going on around me.

Our time, our situation, our health may lead us to ask “why?” Don’t hesitate to ask the question. Asking questions is what humans do. Take to heart, however, as you do ask, that one who asked that question from the Wood of the Cross did it so that we could. Our “why?” is asked with the knowledge that God’s will for us is the fullness of love. It’s why Jesus came. It’s why he went to the Cross. It’s why we’re not forsaken, not despairing, but loved.

The Fifth Word

“I thirst.” John 19:28

John tells us that Jesus speaks this word because he knows that “all was now finished (and to fulfill the scripture).” John’s account of Jesus’ death is marked by images of fulfillment, completion, and perfection. The mission of the Word become flesh who lived among us “and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,” is coming to its fulfillment. He has drained the cup which the Father gave him and now Scripture is fulfilled.

Scholars tell us that the scripture to be fulfilled could be the references to hyssop, which is tied to the paschal/Passover lamb of the Exodus. Jesus is early-on identified by John the Forerunner as “the Lamb of God,” the offering that will bring reconciliation. In the case of this word – speaking of thirst -- it could be Psalm 69, which has the Psalmist complain, “they gave me poison for food, and vinegar to drink.” Regardless, the import is the same, the One who came to do his Father’s will has done it and it is enough.

I thought “enough,” but not in this way, when I tried to take a drink of water and it burned my tongue like fire. It was after my second chemotherapy treatment and I was terribly thirsty, but instead of relief there was pain, pulsing, wracking, hit-the-table pain. It subsided – and with appropriate painkillers – I made it through. Still, “I thirst” and Psalm 69 took on new meaning for me from that moment.

As I journeyed through the seven weeks of treatment and now approaching seven weeks of recovery time, I have often meditated on the Lord’s Passion. That he thirsted, that he suffered told me again and again that I was not alone and what I was going through was not meaningless. Living as we do now, in a new age of plague, if you will, with the threat of infection and death so close, we must turn to our faith, to God to make sense of it all. No matter what comes, we are not alone, and what we experience isn’t meaningless.

Jesus’s mission to do the Father’s will should remind us that we share the same mission. Jesus’ thirst – to love the Father and all the Father created – was fulfilled on the Cross and brought humanity into a renewed relationship with God. Now we must thirst to love as did, and as he taught us. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” [Lk 10:27] That love slakes thirst with sweetness, not vinegar, and it doesn’t burn.

Both Saint Augustine and Saint John Damascene acknowledge the fulfillment aspect, but each with a different tack. Augustine writes, “The Samaritan woman at the well found the Lord thirsting, and by his thirsting, she was filled. She first found him thirsting in order that he might drink from her faith. And when he was on the cross, he said, ‘I thirst,’ although they did not give him that for which he was thirsty. For he was thirsting for them.” So, Augustine sees Jesus’ thirst in terms of spiritual longing, a thirst that God has for Creation to be reconciled and joined into the fullness of union with its Creator. John Damascene sees in Jesus’ word confirmation that he was truly human, thus taking on all our attributes, save sin, as the writer of the Letter of the Hebrews avers. All of our bodily weaknesses, all of that which makes us human, God knows because Christ took on our flesh, lived our life, and died our death.

The fulfillment transforms the Cross from an instrument of death and a symbol of oppression into the means of reconciliation and a symbol of hope. In the Cross we see another aspect of Jesus’ teaching in John’s Gospel when he says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” And it certainly fulfills his teaching, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” All of the foregoing is captured in the work of a third century writer identified as Pseudo-Hippolytus wrote movingly about this transformation. The imagery

used here is rich and it should serve to remind us that what we do today, meditating on the Lord's words from the Cross, can bear fruit. "This tree is my everlasting salvation. It is my food, a shared banquet. Its roots and the spread of its branches are my own roots and extension. In its shade, as in a breeze, I luxuriate and am cared for. Its shade I take for my resting place; in my flight from oppressive heat it is a source of refreshing dew for me. Its blossoms are my own, my utter delight its fruits, saved from the beginning for my harvest. Food for my hunger and well-spring for my thirst, it is also a covering for my nakedness, with the spirit of life as its leaves. Far from me henceforth the fig leaves! Fearful of God, I find it a place of safety; when unsteady, a source of stability. In the face of a struggle, I look to it as a prize; in victory, my trophy. It is the narrow path, the restricted road. It is Jacob's ladder, the passage of angels, at whose summit the Lord is affixed. This tree, the plant of immortality, rears from earth to reach as high as heaven, fixing the Lord between heaven and earth. It is the foundation and stabilizer of the universe, undergirding the world that we inhabit. It is the binding force of the world and holds together all the varieties that human life encompasses. It is riveted into a unity by the invisible bonds of the Spirit, so that its connection with God can never be severed. Brushing heaven with its uppermost branches, it remains fixed in the earth and, between the two points, its huge hands completely enfold the stirring of the air. As a single whole it penetrates all things and all places." (Trans. Boniface Ramsey, BEGINNING TO READ THE FATHERS, p. 81)

In Christ we are satisfied. It is enough.

The Sixth Word *“It is finished.” John 19:30*

Every day of my radiation therapy I would head back to the treatment room and pass by a large set of wind chimes. One day I stopped to read the material posted around them. They were there to be rung when someone had completed their course of treatments. I don't think any angels got wings (pardon the reference to “It's a Wonderful Life”), but eventually I heard them and saw smiling people, one with a particularly wide grin that I came to understand not too long after. When my day came, I rang them – HARD. Chemotherapy had ended a week earlier and finally this, too, was finished. Now it was time to move on and into recovery. It was time to get on with the business of living.

When Jesus utters this word – *tetelestai* – it is finished, scholars tell us it's like a declaration of victory. Everything has been fulfilled. All that the Father has asked – the doing of the Father's will, the completing of the Father's work – has been consummated.

John's vision of the Cross is very different than that of Matthew or Mark. It has little of the outcry, the anguish. Rather it's all about the fruit of what happened when the “word became flesh and dwelt among us,” and the fruit is the restoration of a broken relationship. What Jesus does on the Cross isn't an exercise to appease an angry God, but the restoration of the fulfillment promised humanity in creation – and lost by our own selfishness.

When Jesus speaks this word – *tetelestai* – he's not closing a door, rather he's opening one. This moment fulfills what began when Jesus encountered two of John the Baptist's followers. The Baptist points and his witness triggers a response in his disciples; they follow after Jesus. Jesus notices them and asks a question, “What are you looking for?”/ “What do you seek?” This is heavily symbolic language and there is more to this question than Jesus looking at these two strangers and asking “Hey, how are you?” This isn't a polite opening to a conversation. Rather, Jesus is asking a question that is on the same level as God's question to Adam, “Where are you?” What Jesus is really doing here is defining humanity and calling out the essence of our nature. He's saying, “So you are one of those who seeks.” There is something eternally restless about humanity. We're always looking, always seeking, searching for meaning, for the fulfillment of life. Jesus may have been asking Andrew and his companion, possibly John (“the beloved disciple”), this question, “What are you looking for?” But in actuality, Jesus was asking that question of all of us – and he still does.

Their question in response indicates that he appears to be someone who knows what he's talking, who has an idea of what's ahead, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Again, the question is symbolic language that is far deeper than “What's your address?” The Greek word here is *menein*, to abide or stay, and is used repeatedly in John's Gospel. So much so, that the late Raymond Brown – recognized as the premier Johannine scholar – talks about it as “Johannine immanence,” the presence of the Divine in the human; God comes to abide, to stay with us. So, what the Baptist's followers ask Jesus is really, “Where is HOME?” In other words, show us the way to where we belong. Give us a sense of place. I went back and looked at my notes from seminary and found my professor, Father Demetrius' powerful point. He said that they were asking, “Take us home. We are pilgrims ready to find shalom, to find rest in the Father.” At the core of our spiritual search, then, is this quest for belonging, for a sense of place.

What is finished is that we no longer must search for where we belong, for that sense of place. This is a completion with no limit, no ending. There is shalom – peace that passes understanding – waiting for us. As I celebrated on my final day of treatment, I wasn't so much marking an ending, as celebrating a beginning.

Recovery, a new appreciation for life, and all the possibilities it holds were opened to me again. What we meditate on today is how one OF us, one who is FOR us, has opened a new chapter for all who choose to take the time to walk through the door and find home. Belonging, shalom awaits. It IS finished.

The Seventh Word

“Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.” Luke 23:46

Luke’s three “words” paint a picture, not of a victim, but of one who came with a purpose. Jesus forgives those who crucify him. He welcomes the thief into paradise. Now he gives his spirit to God. Luke’s last word is not the anguish we read in Mark and Matthew, nor the triumphant word of completion in John. Luke shows us Jesus, who has spent his whole life being selfless, even to the moment when he breathes his last.

Emile Guerry, we’ve heard from him before, captured Jesus’ selflessness beautifully in the book GOD THE FATHER. This is what he wrote: “. . . Jesus bringing to realization within me His own enduring oblation to His Father. For filial life can be defined in one word which sums up all the dispositions, all the virtues, all the mystery of Jesus’ life in us: in this one word ‘oblation’ (form *offerre* to offer). Oblation is that deeply rooted disposition by which a soul – altogether disappropriated of itself and maintaining a state of unbroken receptivity to the Divine Spirit – offers itself to the adorable will of the Father that He may be free to fulfil in it the whole design of His Infinite Love, and turn it to account as an instrument made to His service. Jesus’ whole life on earth was suspended between two acts of oblation: Oblation was the first motion of His soul: ‘I come to do Thy will, O God.’ And oblation was His final word: ‘Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’ . . . Oblation is the gift of all that is most personal in ourselves, of our *self* in its innermost core.” [p. 179]

What Guerry, and Luke, capture is that Jesus comes to this moment with absolute confidence in the Father’s care. The Greek tells us that he “entrusts” his spirit to the Father. This goes right along with the Psalm he’s quoting, Psalm 31, which ends, “Be strong and let your heart take courage all you who wait for the Lord.”

Being strong, taking courage in the face of a cancer diagnosis can be difficult. Especially when it’s the third one. Yet, on the day I received it I also received a ‘word’ that just filled my head and my heart. It was a word given to Blessed Julian of Norwich in her REVELATION OF LOVE. She encounters the crucified Lord in her spirit and hears him say, “Sin is behovely, but all shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.” ‘Behovely’ can be translated many ways, including ‘convenient’ and ‘useful,’ but what I took away in the moment it came to me was this – God has this. It was clear to me that what I needed to do was just give myself to it, whatever **it** is, and “all shall be well.” That ‘word’ has stayed with me as I have worked through treatment all the way through these weeks of recovery. I may have faltered from time-to-time, but I have not lost confidence in the One to whom I have entrusted myself.

The last few weeks have brought the world to its knees. Fear like nothing we’ve seen in a long while grips whole nations. Governments, scientists, and medical professionals frantically seek to mitigate and conquer the COVID-19 virus. And all the while the little counter on the television shows us the number of cases, and the number of deaths, rising. Social life, daily life is completely disrupted. Worship and spiritual care, just when we need them most, are disrupted, too. We have to find new ways to gather for worship, while not heightening the risk of disease for ourselves and others. (And now we also must guard against ‘ZOOM bombers’ as we use that platform.) We seek new ways to minister, to offer a word of comfort in the midst of anxious concern. For Christians the holiest week of the year is being spent with alternative online worship experiences. The thought of Easter services over the internet just boggles the mind, but as those words of James Russell Lowell’s ‘Once to Every Man and Nation’ remind us: “New occasions teach new duties, Ancient values test our youth; They must upward still and onward, Who would keep abreast of truth.” What is important is that we keep these days in the best way we can and offer worship to the God who will love us through all of it. So, in the midst of all of it, I stand here to tell you that “all shall be well.”

Jesus showed us how we are to deal with life in all its variations and changes – be selfless. Like Jesus, our lives should be open to the Father and lived in union with Jesus through the Spirit to do the Father’s will. What God has done in Christ is to open the door to union – what Julian called ‘oneing’ – by which we can live as open to God and others as Jesus did.

Jesus offered himself, his spirit to the Father, so that Spirit could be given to a new family, the Church. Foreseen at the foot of the Cross, brought to fruition on Pentecost, Jesus breathed his spirit upon it so that it might thrive. Now is the time for us to receive, to renew that spirit of selflessness, of self-giving love within ourselves, and the world around us. Like Jesus we must strive to live life, “suspended between two acts of oblation.” When we do, we’ll soon understand that truly everything is in the Father’s hands – and that “all manner of thing shall be well.”



LORD Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*