

Good Friday - The Seven Last Words.

Matthew 27.11-26.

And so we follow Christ's last journey to Calvary, to Golgotha, (the Aramaic for 'The Place of a Skull'). It began with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, the civil servant trying to do his best to keep everyone happy. Even his wife tried to put in a good word for Jesus. *She* knew; Pilate knew - surely everyone deep-down knew - that Jesus was innocent. Even the Roman officer who had to carry out the gruesome crucifixion order knew that Jesus was a righteous man.

Pilate gave the baying crowd one last opportunity to do the right thing. He gave them the choice: 'shall I release to you Barabbas, the terrorist, or Jesus?' Interestingly, some NT MSS add the name *Jesus* to Barabbas. (Jesus is merely the Greek form of the common Jewish name 'Joshua'). And here's another interesting thing. In Aramaic 'bar' means 'son of', and 'abba' means 'father'. So 'Barabbas' means 'son of the father'. Wasn't Jesus Christ also 'the Son of the Father'.

So they had a choice, one last chance to get it right. Which one do you want: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus the Son of God the Father? Well, we know which one they chose. When the world was given the choice between a criminal or the purest one who ever lived, they goofed it. What does that say about the world, about humanity? By its choice, humanity condemned itself. No wonder Jesus said, 'Now is the judgement of this world.'

Jesus said seven things from the Cross, 'Seven Last Words'. Tonight we shall meditate on those Seven Last Words.

1) Luke 23.26-34: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

Surely this is the very heart of everything Jesus stands for - forgiveness. He once taught his disciples to turn the other cheek, to pray for your enemies. Jesus not only *said* it; he *did* it. How could he think of forgiving the very people who were causing him such agony as they banged the nails into his hands? What they were doing was not right. Was Jesus condoning what they were doing, as though their violence and callousness did not matter? Did they even *care* whether he forgave them?

Perhaps they didn't. But God is a God of justice, and one day there will be a day of reckoning when those who don't think (or possibly even realise) that they have done any wrong will have to pay. Jesus knew that there was a time when these brutish men were once little children who wouldn't have harmed a fly. Over the years they had come under the grip of the evil one. Out of love for them, for the people they *could* have been, Jesus prayed to God the Father to forgive them, for they did not know what they were doing. They had become hardened.

When Coventry Cathedral was bombed flat in the last war, they found two nails fused together in the explosive heat of the firebomb. They had become fused together in the shape of a crude cross. After the war, that Cross was laid on an altar with the two simple words of Jesus, 'Father, forgive'.

Britain and Germany needed then to forgive each other. The whole *world* is crying out for forgiveness. The world may not *want* Jesus - that's why they killed him - but the world desperately *needs* him and his saving work of forgiveness.

Let us pray: 'Help us, merciful God, to forgive those who trespass against us, and hear us as we pray the words which Jesus himself taught us, saying together, 'OUR FATHER ...'

2) Luke 23.35-43: 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise'.

The scholars wonder where the comma should go in this famous sentence. Should it come before, or after, the word 'Today'? Should it read, 'I say to you today, Thou shalt be with me in Paradise', or, should it read the more familiar way, 'I say to you, *Today* shalt thou be with me in Paradise'?

The problem with the more familiar form is that three days later, on that first Easter Day, Jesus clearly was *not* yet in Paradise, for he said to Mary who tried to touch him, 'Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father'.

Wherever the comma comes, the point is that the Saviour promised to this undeserving wretch that one day he would be with him in nothing less than Paradise. The two men crucified by Christ's side were both bad people. The only thing - and the crucial thing - that distinguished the one from the other was that one was repentant and the other was not.

Our being with Christ for all eternity in Paradise is not dependent on how good we are, but on how repentant we are. Eternal bliss with the Saviour is not earned. It is Christ's gift to us. The only thing going for the criminal was that he had the humility to *ask* for it. His hand was open to receive what Jesus so much wanted to give him - and to *all* of us.

Let us pray: 'Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our souls are restless until they rest in you. Give us open hearts to receive your freely offered gift of salvation, AMEN.'

3) John 19.25-27: 'Woman, behold thy son. [Son], behold thy mother.'

Even in the midst of his terrible suffering - the unspeakable physical pain and mental anguish - Jesus incredibly thought not of himself, but of his mother. He looked out from his own sufferings to see the suffering of his utterly distraught mother, confused at what she saw the world doing to her son. All Jesus could think of was looking after Mary; making sure that she was all right. And so he asked the beloved disciple to take over from him the caring role. The beloved disciple would now care for Mary, as Jesus used to. Looking at Mary and then at the beloved disciple he said, 'Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother'.

Let us pray: 'Thank you, Jesus, that from your Cross you know all our needs and are able to provide for them, AMEN.'

4) Mark 15.33-35: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

Is there a more desperate verse in the whole of scripture? Here Jesus himself felt completely and utterly abandoned by God. 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' If in your own sorrows you have ever felt that God is not listening; that he has abandoned you, then always remember that Jesus himself felt the same. And hanging on that Cross, in dreadful pain with everyone laughing at him, could you blame him for thinking it? 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

Of course, Jesus was quoting Psalm 22 in the Aramaic which was his native language. When the bystanders heard him muttering *Eli, Eli* (my God, my God), they thought he was saying *Eliahu, Eliahu*, Elijah, Elijah.

Sin is what separates us from the holy God. By being placed in the position of abandonment by God, Jesus, the sinless one, stood where sinners stand, separated from God, and it is not a good place to be. St Paul got to the heart of it when he said of Jesus, 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Separated for a moment from God, he has been even where forsaken sinners have been.

Let us pray: 'You, Christ, lead us through no darker rooms, than you went through before; and who into your kingdom comes must enter by this door'. AMEN.

5) John 19.28-29: 'I thirst'.

'I thirst'. It's only one word in Greek, but that one word speaks volumes. It tells us that Jesus was normal. He was human. He was just like us, with the usual bodily needs that we have. 'I'm thirsty'. This was a real human being that they were doing this to; someone just like us. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'.

Let us pray: 'O Lord Jesus, we do not have in you a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. So we may approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need, AMEN'.

6) John 19.30: 'It is finished'.

Again, one word in Greek. But is it the word of failure or of success? Is it 'It is finished. It's over. I've done my best, but the world rejected me, and here I am on this Cross'? Or is it, 'It is finished. It's completed'?

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of the endless sacrifices that had to be made in the Jerusalem Temple to atone for sin and guilt. But Christ's sacrifice was 'once for all'. It's all very well in our modern society talking about 'moving on'. Yes, we shouldn't live in the past, but certain things have to be sorted out. There's a price to be paid, and we *must* not move on. The sin of the world has to be paid for. Jesus did that for us, and *could* do it, because only he was without sin. Only he was a perfect Lamb without blemish.

The authorities saw Christ's death as 'getting him out of their way'. God on the other hand saw his death as the final, perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for the sin of the whole world. Someone has to pay. And Jesus paid for us. 'It is finished'. Now it is complete, and, as the Letter to the Hebrews says again, 'After Jesus had provided purification for sins, *he sat down*'. It was finished. 'He sat down, his saving work complete, at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.'

Let us pray: 'Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we thank thee that of thy tender mercy thou didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; and who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world, AMEN.'

7) Luke 23.44-46: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'.

And now as the end drew near, his saving work complete and they could not hurt him any more than they were doing, peace descended upon Jesus. He knew the Psalms by heart. He had said them all his life. The words of *Psalm 31* came to him, words that he would have said every night of his life as he was going to sleep. In perfect trust he now committed himself to God the Father's safekeeping in the words of the Psalm: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'. And then he gave up the ghost, and the Roman centurion who had inflicted all this on Jesus spoke out the truth, the truth which everyone knew but could not live with: 'Surely this was a righteous man.'

Let us pray: 'Father, into thy hands we commend our spirits.'