

The Seven Last Words

INTRODUCTION (introtit)

1. Luke 23:34: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

We call them the Seven Last Words, but they are really the seven last sentences. In melodramas, you've probably heard the executioner ask the soon-to-be victim, "Any last words?" Jesus had seven answers to that question. The final words of one's life can make a kind of last will and testament. In Jesus' case, however, they say as much about his suffering as his philosophy.

The first of Jesus' last words comes as a complete surprise. He does not try to dissuade his executioners, the way someone throws up their arms at a gunman and yells, "Don't shoot!" No, Jesus prays to his Father in heaven. He does not pray for escape. Nor does he pray for retribution. He offers an improbable prayer requesting the forgiveness of his foes.

Jesus explains why the Father should forgive: those putting him to death are ignorant. That argument is often persuasive. If the perpetrator didn't know what they were doing, you can't really hold a grudge against them. If they had deliberately done wrong, that would be harder to forgive.

We live in an unforgiving climate. If the fire at Notre Dame in Paris had happened to the US Capitol building during multi-million dollar repairs, the company in charge would be out of business by now, politicians would be blamed for mismanagement, and the responsible parties would pay the price of their folly for the rest of their lives.

We are not trained to forgive. But that is what Jesus asked the Father to do. His words make us realize how many offenses against us we have never forgiven.

SONATA I

2. Luke 23:43: Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Luke supplies the first two of the seven words. His entire gospel carries a message of mercy. There alone we find the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Thief, who said on the cross, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Out of options, his life draining away, the thief held hope that the confident Jew dying next to him offered something more.

Do you remember what the good thief calls Jesus when he addresses him from the cross? Not "Rabbi." Not "Teacher". Not "Savior". Not even "Lord". No, instead, he calls him "Jesus". He's the only person in the New Testament who addresses Jesus by his first name unadorned with any title. Jesus seems OK with it. Nothing separates the two of them now. To this man Jesus promises paradise, and not only that, but paradise today. No waiting in line.

There are days when we feel out of options, when mercy seems out of reach, but we take whatever action we can, even if it means putting our complete trust in someone who appears to be in no position to do anything at all. We are

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most trusting when we are most desperate. We trust God in our greatest needs because we have experienced his mercy when we nearly lost hope.

SONATA II

3. John 19:26–27: Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother

From the cross Jesus sees coming into view his mother and the disciple whom he loved. John's gospel never tells us their names. We know his mother is Mary, but only because the other gospels said so. Tradition holds that the beloved disciple was John, but we really do not know his name. It doesn't matter. Their relationships to Jesus are more transcendent than their names.

Jesus invites them to regard each other, as though they were unacquainted, and to see the other in a new light. He knows that after he dies, his mother will suffer the most - left alone with no one to care for her as age escalates fragility. Jesus asks a friend to take her as a mother, and he gives her his friend as a son. He makes him the object of her love and assigns him the duties he no longer can fulfill.

Jesus' life ebbs. The son of a woodworker, he surely wanted to fix what he could, even when his own limbs, fastened to wood, had become immobile. But the opportunities had grown slim.

We at times feel trapped, unable to help the people we love in the simplest of ways. Jesus showed there is always a way. Even when you cannot move, when you hold no physical power, you still have a heart that can love. Attentive to the people who mean the most to us, we can always find a way to care for them, once we hold them in our heart.

SONATA III

4. Matthew 27:46 & Mark 15:34 My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Surely the most plaintive of all the words from the cross is the opening verse of Psalm 22. Jesus, the very emissary of the Father, horrifically held that he felt abandoned.

People have explained this verse in various ways. Some say he probably recited the entire psalm, not just its first words. If you read all of Psalm 22 you reach an ending of confidence in God's mighty power. Surely, some people argue, Jesus had memorized all the psalms, and the evangelists only recorded these words of one of them to tip off the reader: Jesus had complete trust in his Father.

OK, but it doesn't sound that way. What a contrast between the earlier words of forgiveness, promise and care and this startling cry of pain.

This verse is troubling, but it is also reassuring. It tells us that Jesus felt the deepest of all pains - not only the denial of Peter, nor the betrayal of Judas, but the feeling that God himself had wandered far away.

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Jesus endured great physical and emotional pain, so this question naturally floods his mind: “Why?” We have all directed that question to God in moments of great distress. Jesus knew what we experience.

The resurrection eventually made it clear that God had not abandoned Jesus. But in his suffering he could not feel the presence of his Father. We too may feel abandoned, but that does not mean that God is not there.

SONATA IV

5. John 19:28: I thirst.

No mercy. Jesus experienced no mercy. Water is a basic human right, and yet he had none upon the cross. Instead they gave him vinegar to drink. No mercy.

There are people the world over who are thirsty. Some are imprisoned unjustly. Some are young couples unsuccessful in bearing a child. Some are talented people incapable of securing employment. Some are neglected children. And some are just thirsty for water - living in parts of the world where clean water has to be collected from the rain that falls from gutters to barrels - if the rain falls.

At times, in our thirst, we get no mercy. The justice we seek escapes from view. The joy we pursue dashes ever out of reach. The love we yearn to share goes unrequited.

The shortest of the last words of Jesus shows him at his most human. He declares a foundational need - water, and finds himself deprived of another foundational need - compassion.

When we are thirsty, we may focus poorly on the needs of others. Receiving no mercy, we offer none. Yet even in our thirst, God may place within our hands the bucket that someone else needs. If we pause long enough to hear our neighbor's two heartfelt words, “I thirst,” we will thereby pour generously the mercy we hold within to slake another's thirst.

SONATA V

6. John 19:30: It is finished.

In John's gospel, the last words of Jesus send a message of triumph. They do not declare that his mortal life is over, though that is also true. They signal that his work has been accomplished. They are perhaps the most satisfying of all the last words.

What would it take for us to state those words at the end of our life: Not, “It is over,” but “It is accomplished”? In fact, what would it take to say those words at the end of any given day? Do we clearly see the work that God has asked us to accomplish? Are we attending it daily? Or do we put it off for another day?

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On certain days we fail by the words we say or the deeds we do. But if we pursue our mission to help others complete theirs, then we can speak with solace that our work is accomplished.

In a well-finished life, our love continues after we die. If we have used God's gifts, if we have made the world a better place than the one we entered, if we have helped others live and grow, if we have praised God for the gift of our life, then we can declare not just at the end of our life, but at the end of every day, "Our life has meaning. And it is finished."

SONATA VI

7. Luke 23:46: Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

Every night those who pray the church's Liturgy of the Hours include this prayer among the last words to close the day: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

We call it "my spirit," but is it really? We got our life from God, not from ourselves. We had nothing to do with being born. Life comes as a gift to us, pure and simple. And yet, we think of life as our own, as something we are entitled to have, to enjoy, and to keep at all costs. We are taught that the more we possess the happier we will be; the more we pursue the pleasures of the moment and the less we restrain our appetites, the more we will find joy.

But it just isn't so, as we have all learned, sometimes the hard way. This prayer is one of the wisest we can say. It demonstrates our complete trust. God commended the spirit to us in the first place, and God will take it back at the end of our days. We should be circumspect, as was Jesus.

The seven last words of Jesus embrace confidence and fear, concern for those left behind amid the agonizing thirst for daily needs and lifelong satisfaction. In the final hours of his life, in his last deeds and words, Jesus showed us how to live and how to die - entrusting back to God the spirit we received.

SONATA VII

THE EARTHQUAKE (exeunt)

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