

Good Friday 30 Mar 2018 3pm Service

Seven Words from the Cross

Address One

Luke 23: 32- 34

Today we spend time meditating upon the seven so-called 'words' spoken by Christ on the cross. These are sayings attributed to Jesus during the hours of his crucifixion.

Three of the sayings are in Luke, three in John, and one is in both Matthew and Mark. The first saying is from Luke: *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

Forgiveness is a difficult thing. It doesn't come all that naturally to us.

In fact, mercy and forgiveness are more likely to be seen as signs of weakness.

'Stand up for yourself,' we hear. 'Don't let him get away with it.' 'It's your right.'

'Your honour must be maintained.' 'You're entitled to retribution.' Then we

assume, mistakenly, that God is like this, too. God's honour must be maintained, so something must be done by the sinner to put the relationship right. But

forgiveness? Here's the thing. The model of forgiveness we get from God is that

it expects nothing from those who are being forgiven. Forgiveness isn't limited to those who say they're sorry. Forgiveness isn't restricted to those who repent.

God's forgiveness is also for those for whom repentance is furthest from their minds. Those who know not what they do. Forgiveness is undeserved.

Unexpected. Unearned. Forgiveness is a miracle.

There's something else. We are to forgive, but there's more. We are to forgive our enemies. Forgive those who hate us. Forgive those who curse us. Forgive those who treat us badly, spitefully, unfairly.

It would have been one thing for Christ to forgive his disciples and friends. But quite another to forgive those who were driving nails into his hands and feet.

So the example Jesus sets before us isn't simply to forgive in general, but to forgive our enemies in particular.

We're to take the people for whom we have no time, and who, we think, have no time for us, and regard them as the people we are most commanded to forgive for any hurt or violation or trouble caused to us. It's not a pleasant prospect. But we need to remember the times when we were forgiven by the people from whom we least expected it. People who put aside their distaste of us, and forgave us, when we had no right to it.

We can forgive, because we have been forgiven. We can do it, because somebody has done it to us.

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Address Two

Luke 23: 39-43

Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

These words were spoken to one of the two criminals who were being crucified either side of Jesus – the one who had said, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom,' or, in another translation, 'into your kingly power.' This thief is not repentant. He didn't say he was sorry. He just asked to be remembered. And Jesus' response shows the generosity of God: *Today you shall be with me in Paradise.* Perhaps Jesus' reply was a correction. The thief assumed the Kingdom of God was to come. 'Remember me *when you come* into your Kingdom.'

But Jesus is saying, *today* you are in the Kingdom. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not at the end of the ages, but now.

My kingdom is now, and you are accepted now. No need to earn forgiveness, for it is free. The law, with all its procedures that clutter up the books of *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*, has been superseded by the gospel. There is now a new covenant, not an old contract. Under the old contract, the dwelling place of God was the temple at Jerusalem. Now, under the new covenant, God dwells amongst his people, the Church. And there are many approaches to this God,

none of which require the fulfilment of procedures, or the completion of visa requirements, or naturalization procedures.

God's forgiveness is free. And within the Church we are to experience that freedom of access, freedom of relationship, freedom of acceptance. And so it is today that we are in paradise. Not tomorrow, after we have filled out the forms, or completed the penance.

But we need to be on our guard, because we could so easily drop back into the ways of the law from which Jesus came to free us. Make baptism the substitute for Jewish initiation. Make the eucharist the equivalent of the Old Testament sacrifices. Make Christian ethics the new version of the Law. Make the New Testament the sacred book of the New Israel.

Make Bishops, Priests and Deacons the equivalent of High Priests, Priests and Levites. And in the end, the Church is the Temple revived, and Christ died in vain.

Jesus proclaimed a God who was more merciful than the God of the Law, so that, already, today, we can be with him in Paradise.

Address Three

John 19: 23-27

Woman, behold your son behold your mother.

These words were spoken to Jesus' mother, and to the so-called 'disciple whom Jesus loved.' In John's gospel, Mary is never named, and here she's simply referred to as 'woman.'

Mary is mentioned only once elsewhere in the gospel - at the wedding at Cana. There Jesus had said there that his hour had not yet come (2:4). Now his hour has come, and it brings for her a new relationship - not to him, but to the disciple whom he loved.

The disciple, who is never named, is the representative disciple, the believer. So Jesus adopts the believer into his family, as his brother, the son of his mother. The beloved disciple, the believer, will bear testimony to Jesus. He stands for all

the family of the woman – the brothers and sisters of Jesus, by a new birth. So Jesus gives us new relations, because we are Christians, members of his family. We all recognize that we have a duty to our family – our parents, brothers, sisters, children, and so on. And everyone would think we were a bit off if we neglected that duty. It's a duty to our own family, and it's a natural duty. Jesus is now saying that those who follow him have new relations – new brothers and sisters and mothers and children. And it can be anyone at all.

The Samaritan had to be a neighbour to an arch-enemy, a Jew. And the Jew had to be neighboured by a Samaritan. The people to whom we are to be neighbour are usually near to us. But then - who isn't near today? Indonesia is near. Africa is near. Afghanistan is near. Iraq is near.

And Jesus may be pointing even nearer - to our own mother, or father, or mother-in-law; our own child, or sister or brother. Or to the people we have to work with, or meet, or share a home with, or live in the same street, or queue up together in the same supermarket.

So at the cross, Jesus adopts the believer into his family as his brother, the son of his mother.

And this believer, the new son, stands for all those who, by a new birth, will now be the off-spring of his mother, and be the church of the future.

The unknown disciple is the future. And Mary accompanies the future away from the cross.

There's much to be said for the view that the life of the Church begins at this point. The cross wasn't the end, but the beginning. The beginning of a movement with such a new and vibrant understanding of God as would permanently change the way people related, not just to God, but to each other. It was the beginning of a new life.

Woman, behold your son ... behold your mother.

Address Four

Matthew 27:39-47

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This, the fourth saying, is found in two of the gospels – Mark and Matthew. It's a quotation from Psalm 22. And, in Mark's and Matthew's account, they are the last words Jesus spoke. Jesus, forsaken by God? How could this be? Perhaps we should think of it like this. Jesus has been forsaken. Totally. His mother and his brothers have said he's mad. The Pharisees and Herodians wanted to destroy him because they thought he was bad. The scribes from Jerusalem thought he was in league with the devil. His disciples ran away. One of them betrayed him. The one they called the Rock disowned him, to a female slave. The Jewish Council said he was a blasphemer.

And, for all that the crowds gathered around him during his ministry, at the last they thought of him as the dregs, the bottom, the worst person who has ever lived, a deluded mad prophet, a would-be destroyer and rebuilder of the Temple, a deranged healer, a neurotic, a psychopath. He has no power, no authority, no followers, no good opinion of himself.

And finally, Jesus has no sense that God approves of him. God hasn't intervened to save him. God's not given him anything. God's not even given him anything to say except that God hasn't given him anything to say. All he does is quote Psalm 22. A crucified man is a non-entity. All you can do with a crucified man is to bury him. He has nothing, not even any clothes. He cannot call anything his own. And so he says that God has abandoned him.

How does this help us? Well, today of all days, we don't feel any envy, or jealousy. We don't think 'I wish it were me. I wish I were the Messiah, instead of him.' Nobody envies Jesus today. No-one is jealous of his crucifixion. And that's why he's our Saviour. He hasn't hung on to life, or good will, or self-respect, or the allegiance of his disciples, or thinking he was right, or anything that gave him an edge over other people. He kept nothing that could become between him and

us. He let everything go, so that there would be no barrier to separate him from us. And God said to him, 'That's right. You've got nothing now – nothing to call your own. You are the last and the least. So now you can be their Saviour.' Because he has nothing, we need not be afraid of him. What frightens us in other people is their success, power, accomplishments, achievements. There is none of that in Jesus crucified, only complete failure - failure to persuade anybody, or make them see the point of what he said, or follow him, or hold him in high esteem, or look up to him, or respect him, or admire him, or worship him – or anything. Jesus is the total failure. So here's the person no-one can fear. So he is our Saviour.

To Jesus, the last, who is first, be glory and praise now and for ever. Amen.

Address Five

John 19: 28-29

I thirst.

These words occur only in John's gospel, although Mark and Matthew both refer to one of the bystanders running off and fetching a sponge, which he soaked in sour wine, and holding it up to Jesus' lips on the end of a cane.

Luke makes no mention of thirst, or of bystanders going off to fetch sponges, because he has said that Jesus vowed to drink nothing until the coming of the kingdom (22:18).

The cry reminds us of two things.

First, it reminds us of Jesus' humanity.

He was 'truly human,' frail, vulnerable, weak, and, like you and me, susceptible to pain, mental as well as physical.

As well being physically tortured to death, he was mentally tortured to death. He was mocked to death. The crown of thorns, the purple robe, the inscription over the cross, the spitting, the jeering, the taunting, the sarcasm – if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. He said he saved others. Now look, he can't even save himself. Even his betrayal and denial and desertion by the disciples is

a form of mockery. Mental hardship. Physical hardship. We're reassured that no amount of suffering we might have to endure was not already endured by Jesus. Second, these words remind us that the writer of the Fourth Gospel saw Jesus' death as faithful to Scripture. It was 'in fulfilment of the Scripture' that Jesus said 'I thirst.'

So the writer draws the phrase 'I thirst' from Psalm 69:21 which says, 'They gave me gall to eat: and when I was thirsty they gave me vinegar to drink.' Vinegar – to aggravate his thirst.

Understanding Jesus' death as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies is important for John. Jesus' death was a mark of the total offering of a life of obedience to God. This has inspired some commentators to see also, in this words, *I thirst*, the longing of Jesus for believers to come to him, and to the Father. And so we thirst too. We thirst for the living God.

Address Six

John 19: 30

Jesus said, '*It is finished.*' 'It is accomplished.'

He didn't mean, 'the drink of vinegar is finished.' And not just 'my life is finished.' But – the work I came to do is finished.' I've completed my job. By giving up my life, I've shown the love God has for his people. There's no greater love than this. Nothing more than I can do.

For the writer of John's Gospel, Jesus is the seed that must die, in order to bear fruit. He's the one who lays down his life for his friends. In John, more than in any other gospel, we see Jesus as the one who voluntarily surrenders his life.

Jesus had said that he must lay down his life. This is the command he received from his Father, and this is also what his love for his friends leads him to do. If he dies, he will bear fruit in the lives of others because he will be in them, and they will live through him.

He has said that he must go, so that the Spirit might come.

All that needs to be done, therefore, is for him to surrender his life.

And so his final word in John is – It is completed. And he bows his head, and hands over his spirit.

Address Seven

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit

Luke 23:44-48

Christianity operates with the minimum information about the future. If someone were to ask us, what do you know about what will happen to you when you have died? we should have to say that we know nothing for certain. And we'd be right to think this, because after all, hopes and expectations that were expressed in some parts of the New Testament didn't happen in the way that the writers thought they would. Paul thought that not all of his contemporaries would die before the end of the world, but they did. And we too have no information about life after death, the end of the world, or the life of the age to come. And it's right that we should not have this information. It's not a defect in Christianity that it leaves us in ignorance about the future. Our relationship with God doesn't allow us to have certainty about what's to happen to the world and to us, because it's a relationship of trust and hope, and this excludes foreseeing and knowing in advance. We have to be ignorant of our future, in order to rely on God totally. What we do have is our present relationship with God, and our experience of him in the past. And if we think he's dealt with us generously, in calling us into existence, and in his dealings with us so far, we can hardly think that he'll be different with us in the future.

Christian hope is trusting in God, without specifying what will happen. To see something, or to know what will happen, is no longer to hope. There's no point hoping for what we can already see, or already have. The fact is that God has kept us all in the dark, in order that we may wait with the purest hope.

So we commend our spirit to God, without anything to go on except what really matters, and that's our experience of his love and generosity and forgiveness so far. And this has evolved as a result of our relationship with him as a reality

inherent within us, at one with us, suffering and celebrating with us, dealing with us so generously and kindly that, against all the odds that are from time to time pitted against us, we have managed to cope, and have yet survived.

More than that, we have enjoyed the riches of love and care and support, and we have managed to accomplish abundantly far more than ever we could ask or imagine.

So we commend ourselves to the God who cares for us with an intensity that beggars our belief.

We commend ourselves to the God whose goodness transforms our weakness, and whose mercy forgives our sin. We commend ourselves to the God who died for us, to make something of us.

We commend ourselves to the God into whose hands were commended the life of the One who died that we might live. We commend ourselves to this God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

John Shepherd