

Words from the Cross – Good Friday 2024

Father forgive them – Luke 23:34. (Rev Richard Haynes)

When they came to the place called the skull they crucified him there along with the criminals- one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Apparently it is a relatively short walk, about five hundred metres from Pilate’s fortress to Golgotha - the place of execution. Three doomed men are escorted by four soldiers. Pilate it seemed wasn't worried about anybody trying to rescue Jesus, after all he had probably heard that those closest to him had fled. Seeing a scene like this would hardly be incentive for them to return, or for anyone to intervene. Each prisoner carried around their neck a small tablet on which the charge against him is written. This shows everyone that Rome does not forgive its enemies.

Jesus and the others were all stripped naked in order to strip them of all dignity; they were thrown to the ground, arms stretched out to the two ends of the crossbar to which then their hands were nailed. The crossbar and body were raised and attached to a vertical pole on their feet nailed to the pole.

It was very common for the crucified to yell insults at their executioners. It is the most natural thing in the world to curse those who do us, all those we love, such harm. So the soldiers will be prepared to hear what these men would throw it then. And yet they heard the one who took the centre place say “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Forgiveness is beautiful in theory but far more difficult in practice. Rather than forgive, it is often more natural to be angry and vengeful. Yet Jesus taught his followers that we must love even our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and forgive those who sin against us, no matter how often they do it.

Imagine how different the world would be if nations forgave nations and people forgave people?

After he had been beaten, whipped, spat upon, mocked, and nailed to the cross by the Roman soldiers, Jesus asked his Father to forgive them, because they didn’t know what they were doing.

In one sense, of course, they did know. They were carrying out a brutal form of capital punishment in the name of the mighty Rome. But they didn’t understand that they were killing the Son of God, and the consequences. Nevertheless, even from the cross, Jesus modelled the nature of the forgiveness he taught, not just as an example but also as an encouragement to us when we’re conscious of our sin.

I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise (Rev Paul Day)

Some thoughts on Luke 23:43

Earlier on in Luke's gospel Jesus said "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance". Words that he said in response to the religious leaders' reactions to him dining with Levi the tax collector and associating with other so called "sinners". And here in his last moments we see Jesus once more in the company of criminals as he is crucified with two thieves, one of whom calls out to Jesus.

This thief recognised there was more going on here than met the eye. There was more going on here than simply the death of three criminals. There was something different about the man on the cross in the middle. Who knows, perhaps this thief had heard Jesus speak at some stage; certainly its quite likely he would have heard about Jesus. Perhaps he even knew that Jesus spent time with people like him.

Maybe then his cry "Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom" was based on things he had heard or heard about; maybe he thought that Jesus would look with compassion upon him – even while hanging on the cross. Perhaps they were simply words of a desperate man trying to save his soul.

But what can we say about Jesus' response – "I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise".

We cannot build a theology of eternal life from these few words; we cannot say what heaven will be like; what paradise means. But we can say that there is a certainty in these words. This is not maybe, perhaps or mere possibility. This will happen. Today you WILL be with me in paradise.

Tradition says that when he died Jesus descended into hell – our creed says those same words. So the "today" is not simply a chronological marker. Its there to emphasise the certainty of eternal life, which is life outside the limitations of time.

And the promise holds for us too. All of us. Those of us who have tried to lead good lives for many years, and those whose repentance is late on. Everyone – righteous or sinner – everyone who turns to God will benefit from the promise. Today you will be with me in paradise.

Paradise – like the garden of Eden at the start of the Bible. In the presence of God; in perfection and eternal. Today. You. Will. Be with me. In paradise.

John 19:27 'Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother' (Rev Wendy Martin)

Mary, the Godly Jewish girl, whom Angel Gabriel had surprised, when he announced to her, she'd been chosen to carry and bear the Christ child, responded to God, 'Let it be so, according to your will'. She relinquished her life to God's service, not knowing what that would entail.

Mary, as Jesus' mother, would have fed, bathed, clothed, comforted, taught Jesus, her first-born, as she would have, her subsequent children.

At 12, Jesus caused his mother to be anxious, even a bit irritable perhaps, as he was nowhere to be seen on the journey back home from the Jerusalem Passover festival that year. Tired and wanting to get home, Mary and Joseph had been searching for Jesus for three days, to have Jesus respond to them once found: 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house? Causing Mary once again, 'to ponder these things in her heart'.

And so, later still, and once an adult, we arrive, with Jesus and Mary at the wedding at Cana. Embarrassingly, for the hosts, the wine had run out. Mary, Jesus' mother, says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you", referring to her son, Jesus. "My time has not yet come", Jesus responds, or, in other words, 'The time to reveal who I really am, the Messiah, is not yet. Although his first miracle ensued as he changed water into wine.

And so, we fast forward to the day of Jesus' death. Mary, along with many other women amongst the disciples, would have accompanied Jesus during his life of ministry and teaching – perhaps not all the time, for she was the matriarch of a large family, but here, this day, John tells us, *'Jesus' mother was standing beside his cross. So was her sister Mary, the wife of Clopas, with Mary Magdalene too...'*

What would she have seen these past days and hours? What is she looking at now? How did she feel with her first-born son nailed and dying on a cross, barely able to hold himself up enough, so that he could breathe?

And yet, we're told, from that place of agony, *'Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple he specially loved, standing there. "Mother" he said, "Look! There's your son'. Then he spoke to the disciple. "Look! He said, "There is your mother." From that time, we are told, the disciple welcomed her into his home as if she was his own mother.*

Even while dying on the cross, Jesus showed great concern about those closest to him. He instructed the disciple whom he loved, John, one of Jesus' closest companions & the writer of this Gospel to care for Mary, his mother. Mary's husband, Joseph, had probably died by this time. As a widow, with poor laws or social services then, Mary had no independent means by which to care for herself. Jesus, as her eldest son, with that responsibility,

entrusted his mother to his closest friend, the one who had stayed with him at the cross, whereas the other disciples had run away to hide.

John, one commentator suggests, was a single, young man, whose mother had perhaps, already died. Now, John also had a mother to care for him. This final act, for Jesus, brought him peace, for, we are told then, 'He knew everything had been completed'.

My God, My God - Mark 15:34 (Rev Richard Haynes)

And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? Which means my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

At this most desolate of times, Jesus quotes the words which open Psalm 22. Most Psalms begin with Lament, but few so powerful and frightening. Is this why Jesus chose it?

Jesus speaks in his native Aramaic language. "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" It is a desperate cry. A moment of horror as the realisation that all you love and need and value in life is not longer there. It is the cry of complete and under abandonment.

Jesus is totally alone at his death. He's been condemned by the temple authorities, the people have not come to his defence, most of his closest followers have fled, around him he can only hear mockery and insults. God had not come to help him. His beloved Father had left him alone to face this most awful of deaths.

He knew this time was coming - a short while earlier, he had prayed in agony, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" but this cry expresses such agony, that it is as if even the worst he could have imagined was nowhere near as bad as it actually was.

On the cross, Jesus bore the awful punishment for all the sins ever committed by his people, which includes us, and for the only time in all of eternity, he experienced complete separation from his Father, the Abba with whom he had enjoyed the closest relationship there could ever be. As one with the Father, it is as if Jesus has been ripped apart from himself.

Even though he had once trusted that he would die only to rise and regain his loving relationship with his Father, the horror and anguish of this moment overwhelmed him. Was this cry a cry of doubt? When have we called out in doubt like this?

It was both a human and a divine outcry, a mystery that can shake us to the core and drives us to repentance and worship of our Saviour.

And yet this is still an expression of faith. He calls him in Eloi, "my God" - My God. God is still his God despite everything. Jesus does not doubt God's existence or his power to save him.

So perhaps Jesus chose Psalm 22 not only because of how it starts, but how it ends: with an expression of assurance in God.

"Future generations will serve him; they will speak of the Lord to the coming generation. People not yet born will be told: The Lord saved his people!".

I am thirsty. (Rev Paul Day)

Some thoughts on John 19:28

Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Words that for a Christian are words that flow easily of the tongue. And perhaps as we think of Jesus' words from the cross we are brought to a place where we can see this double truth very clearly.

And these three short words "I am thirsty" show his humanity very well.

Hanging on the cross; in the heat of the sun; wracked by pain; betrayed by a close friend; deserted by most of his so called followers Jesus cries those words : "I am thirsty". Give me a drink. I am in need.

The one who is the living water which bubbles up so that others can find true life calls out because he is thirsty. He needs water.

Jesus – the one whose life has been marked out by the generous giving of himself is now in need. He is not afraid of naming his need; he is not afraid of asking for help. His cry of "I am thirsty" shows his willingness to receive, to be dependent on others.

We live at a time where we are encouraged – implicitly or explicitly – to be independent; to be self sufficient; to rely on our own resources and ability. Where to admit that we need something is seen as a sign of weakness.

The example and in particular these words of Jesus say otherwise. There is nothing wrong with saying we are in need; nothing wrong with expressing our vulnerability; nothing wrong with admitting we can't do it all ourselves. The world would be a better place if we were more prepared to say these things; if we could ask for help and not feel ashamed or embarrassed.

We often take the teaching of Jesus to heart in wanting to serve others. Perhaps we should be more prepared to take the example of Jesus to heart and admit to our need of others. By our words and actions to show that a world where we all are willing to both give and receive is the kind of world that God always designed and desired. A world where each of us needs and is needed by everyone else.

Jesus' last words from the cross: John 19: 20 'It is finished'. (Rev Wendy Martin)

We read in John 19: 30, *'When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished.'" With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.'*

What had finished? What was it that was now completed?

Until the death of Jesus, a complicated system of sacrifices was needed, according to the Jewish faith, to have sins forgiven by God. Sin separates people from God, and only through the sacrifice of an animal, offered to God as a substitute for sin, could people be forgiven and be made clean before God. However, people sin continually, and so frequent sacrifices were required at that time.

Earlier in his Gospel, John 3:16,17 explains to us that:

'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him'.

John tells us Jesus became the final and ultimate sacrifice for sin. The original word meaning, 'finished,' is the same as saying, 'paid in full'. Jesus came to finish God's work of salvation, to pay the full penalty for our sins. With Jesus' death, the complicated sacrificial system ended because Jesus took all sin, ours, and that of the whole world, past and future, upon himself. We have been reconciled to God and can now freely approach God because of what Jesus has done for us.

So, when Jesus speaks his last words on the cross: "It is finished!" "It's all done!" "It's complete!", he is saying, he has finished the work the Father had given him to do (17:4). He has loved 'to the very end' his own disciples, followers, people. He has accomplished the full and final task. The price has been paid completely and for ever. Jesus is the Saviour of the world, the redeemer of our sins and the sins of the whole world.

Our response, when we hear, learn and understand this amazing Good News, is incredible thankfulness to God, to Jesus; and immeasurable love, joy, hope, and peace, that is not of this world, but comes from God into our lives, our hearts. We also know that we live with God now, and will do, eternally forever. God has created us, with free will, to understand this and this is our purpose here on earth. We are to share God's love, this Good News with others. We are to worship God and give him back our lives in return, in love and service. We love because Christ loved us first.

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. (Rev Paul Day)

Some thoughts on Luke 23: 46

These are the last words Luke recorded Jesus saying before he died

As so often we have Jesus quoting from a psalm – this time Psalm 31. How often do we find this in Jesus. Scripture is always there. His life is soaked in it. From the temptations right through to his crucifixion his knowledge of scripture shines through. So often he used scripture as he tried to explain who he was and what he had come to accomplish. Perhaps we too need to be more aware of the promises of God contained in scripture. Promises which can help us in our daily lives, promises that remind us of God's presence and his love.

But these words also show us something else too. Here, at the very end of his life, Jesus was in control. It was Jesus who commended himself into God's care.

A couple of years back I saw a dramatic retelling of the Passion story at the Baptist Church – you may recall it. It told the story of the crucifixion from a number of different viewpoints, including that of a Roman Centurion.

It was the centurion's viewpoint that struck me – probably because it was one we don't often see or think about. This soldier was present throughout those last days and he shared his thoughts with us.

He saw Jesus ride into Jerusalem on the donkey. He was in the temple courts as Jesus overturned the money changers' tables. He was in the party that arrested Jesus in the garden and took him for trial. He was at the trial and then stood guard at the crucifixion. He was even a guard at the tomb (as he said – the strangest command he had ever received to guard a tomb).

The thing that stood out for him was the fact that in all of these situations Jesus was in control. He noticed it particularly in the temple courts and at the trial. Others may have thought they had authority, but it was clear to this centurion – who knew plenty about power and authority - where the true authority lay. Pilate thought he had the power, but in the end he was powerless – not willing or not able to decide for himself what to do.

And Jesus' authority was present even at the cross, it was as a response to Jesus' authority and control that the centurion uttered the words "truly this man was the Son of God".

And I think that these thoughts of control remind us again that no matter what things might look like on the surface, God is in control. I am sure we can all say that God is always alongside us, always with us whatever we are going through. These thoughts about control and authority take that a little further and make a good place to end our meditations this afternoon. Not only is he with us, but ultimately he is in control.

And this means that not matter how bad things appear

Good will triumph over evil

Easter Morning will come after Good Friday

Joy follows sorrow

We pause: we are still: we listen: we hear;

*we pause again: we look around, we move on – refreshed and ready again
to celebrate the miracle of life. Your life in us.*