



**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Good Friday 2020

Meditations on the Seven Last Words of Christ

by Readers Christine Portman and Jane Quarmby

In the 18th century, Haydn wrote his choral setting of The Seven Last Words: there was already a centuries'-old tradition of using the Words as a meditation for Good Friday devotions. A few years later the choral setting was reworked into a string quartet. First performed in the cathedral of Cadiz, each section was preceded by a short homily so that during the music, which beautifully echoes the rhythm of Christ's words, listeners might meditate on their meaning.

Today we offer you different ways of observing this holy day. Should you choose to follow these meditations, you might read the passage and then follow the link to the music. It may be helpful to listen rather than watch the performers. The pieces of music last between 5 and 8 minutes. You could choose to complete the seven sections one after another, in which case the whole meditation will take you around one hour. Alternatively you might prefer to do one, or several at a time. If you don't feel drawn to the music, you could simply read the seven short meditations.

We hope that these reflections will help you in your observance of Good Friday.

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

When they came to the place that is called “The Skull”, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them for they not know what they do”.

Luke 23.34

Perhaps you have heard the wonderful voice of Kathleen Ferrier singing the aria “He was despised” from Handel’s Messiah. The moving words continue: “A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”. On Good Friday it may be natural for us to focus on the Man of Sorrows - but in the Gospels, Jesus is more often the Man of Joys. His first miracle was to turn water into wine at wedding feast. Fully human and fully divine, his deep compassion for us comes from full knowledge of what it is like to be a human being. He knows at first hand what it is to be abandoned and to suffer at the hands of others.

This first Word offers us insight into what it means to forgive. As Jesus forgave, he also prayed to his Father. He understands that so many of our hurtful actions are committed without any thought, understanding or consciousness. He also understands that those who sin are much more than their actions. Condemning people for their actions and refusing to forgive keeps both parties trapped in sin: the victims paralysed by hatred, the perpetrators unable to free themselves from the prison of the others’ hatred.

In his meditations on the Seven Last Words, Fr. James Martin writes:

“Forgiveness is a gift you give the other person and yourself. Jesus knows this. And he not only tells us this several times in the Gospels, but he shows us this. He is teaching us, even from the Cross.”

Sometimes we may find it impossible to forgive someone. But we could start by recognising how much hurt is caused by the refusal to forgive. Once we have the desire to forgive, we are already in a place where we can ask for God’s grace to help us. With that grace, our prayer will be answered.

Dr John V Taylor, a late Bishop of Winchester, wrote:

“Forgiveness doesn’t make light of evil. It knows the swelling sense of outrage, the shock and shame of injury. But instead of throwing it back or nursing the grievance, forgiveness transforms it and turns the event of utmost evil into the occasion of utmost good.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMbGWPaXX8Y&feature=youtu.be>

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Luke 23.39-44

It’s a stark contrast between the two criminals, one who is with the rest of the crowd of Jesus’s persecutors, still throwing insults at him even when all three men have had long nails hammered through their wrists and feet, in agony and near suffocation. Surely you’d think no-one would have the breath to spare just to be cruel to some-one else, hanging next to you, suffering the same pain? No thought for what might come after death, no thought that actually he himself might deserve what he’s going through where-as the man in the middle didn’t. But right to the end this man persisted in cruel jibes.

A real contrast to the other criminal, who accepted that he was being rightfully punished for his crimes (though nowadays we would question whether this inhumane, long drawn out torture would be acceptable for anyone whatever they’d done.) In the last hours, Jesus had one true believer right next to him. He may have been a criminal, he may have been a rebel or a robber, but at the end of Jesus’ life on earth he showed himself to be a real believer in him as the Messiah, had faith in him. When no other adult male supporter was there, for fear of the Roman retaliation, there was one man at least. And for his faith, his repentance and his belief, Jesus promised him that he would be in Paradise that day. A huge reward, and what a comfort to that man as he died. There would be no halfway house, Jesus would be taking him straight to the Garden of Eden. Was that also a comfort to Jesus that he wasn’t as alone that day as he might have been?

Let us pray that this Eastertide, our faith and our reaction to the dark times we live in will be as strong, and that we can bring comfort to others even as we suffer. It’s easy to think as we live in isolation that we are the only ones who are worried, lonely, bored, depressed, or ill. It’s all too easy to look just at our own troubles. It’s easy to lash out when we are hurting. But there are many others alongside us who would benefit from a friendly word or message, or just to know that some-one is thinking of them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJTKN-27YDM&feature=youtu.be>

“Woman, here is your son Here is your mother.”

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

John 19.26-27

Mary’s whole life as we read it in the Gospels was a life of letting go. At the Annunciation, though confused about what lay ahead, her response to God’s call was a clear “Yes”. Throughout her life with Jesus she had to learn to let him become the person God had fully intended. It could not have been easy. Think of her panic when she discovered her 12 year-old was missing and her hurt when he seemed to turn his back on his parents:

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? But they did not understand what he said to them.

Think of that seemingly-sharp comment when Mary asked him to help out at the wedding in Cana: “Woman, what concern is that to you and me?”

Now comes the worst of all. Mary has to witness her son’s torture and death. What love and strength was in her that she could be with him until the very last. And in return, what love and compassion pours down to her from the Cross: “Woman, here is your son Here is your mother”.

A different, self-pitying Jesus might have been referring to himself: “Mother - look at what’s become of me!” But no, even in his final moments, Jesus is caring for her. From now on she will be taken into John’s household. The beloved disciple will care for her as his own mother.

Even in his extreme pain and suffering Jesus teaches his Way: to love one another as he loves us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtvVNu2bLmA&feature=youtu.be>

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

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

Mark 15.33-34

Right at the end, Jesus quotes from Psalm 22 “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Even now, he is proving he is the Messiah, the one written about in the Old Testament.

A real cry from the heart. At this point Jesus has been enduring unimaginable pain, unable to straighten up on the cross, unable to relieve the pain from his wrists without more pain from his feet, his lungs squashed under the stance he has been literally nailed into. He feels abandoned – his male followers can't go near because the Romans would have seen them as a threat and they'd have been killed too. Despite his female relatives and friends being with him, who were allowed to be there as they were not seen as a threat, and the affirmation of his true nature from the criminal alongside him, he's had enough. He wants his Father from Heaven to do something, ease this terrible pain and suffering. Jesus has been bullied, tortured, scoffed at and humiliated – enough is enough. Why has God not been there, where is God?

How often do we all feel like this when things are at their blackest? How often do we feel that it's time for God to do something about it and help us? How often do we cry for help and feel abandoned when none comes? As Rowan Williams puts it:

“The cry to God as Father in the New Testament is not a calm acknowledgement of a universal truth about God's abstract fatherhood. It is the child's cry out of a nightmare. It is the cry of outrage, fear, shrinking away, when faced with the horror of the world – yet not simply or exclusively protest, but trust as well.”

When things look at their worst for us, we know from these few words that Jesus also felt what we are feeling. He knows what it's like to be suffering and not hearing God, or seeing God in what's going on around us. He too complained to God, bitterly and despairingly. And it's OK to feel like that. As Jesus was being crushed by the weight of the world's evil, he too felt cut off from God by the magnitude of what his final job was to do – to die in payment for all the evil that humanity had done over the years, to wipe the slate clean for us all, not only then but now and in the future too. Sometimes we do feel alone, we do feel cut off from God and all help – but as day follows night, bringing light to all the dark corners of our minds, so does God's redeeming love follow us. But sometimes we do need to complain loudly to God too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOk-nMrDQo4>

“I thirst”

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), “I am thirsty”. A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth

John 19.28-29

During Lent some of us have been looking at the part of the Pilgrim course which focuses on the Beatitudes. In session 2 we looked at *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled.*” An opening question for that session was “Be honest. What do you hunger and thirst for more than anything else?” No one in our group answered “Water”.

Luckily, few of us have experienced desperate thirst, still fewer a time when we didn't have fairly quick access to a clean drink. That, of course, is not the case for millions of people in our world today. According to the WHO, 3.4 million people, mostly children, die annually from water-related diseases.

Thirst is a basic survival instinct. The body is dehydrated, the brain detects the imbalance of salts in our blood, we cannot ignore the signals. Exposed to the elements, sweating in his pain, losing blood from his wounds, Christ is thirsty. He cries out. We can't doubt that he suffered the pain of any other human being in that situation. Immediately after crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?",

someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick to drink saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come and take him down".

While some commentators see this as evidence of mockery, others put a different slant on this act. John's account omits the mocking words. Mark tells us that the sour wine was mixed with myrrh or gall - a mixture that Roman soldiers sometimes administered to the crucified in order to numb the pain. So the soldiers' action might in fact have been an act of kindness.

Jesus fully understood our suffering. Here he thirsts physically, but in his whole life on earth he thirsted for righteousness. When others thirst, are we so kind?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TsTb4EdqM0>

"It is finished"

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.'

John 19.30

And what a relief it must have been to him. The ordeal is over, he's done everything God has asked of him, and finally he can move on to the next part of his task. He hasn't wavered, he's stuck to it through the good times and the bad, and now finally he can give up. He didn't turn back, he went through with God's plan but now that part is thankfully over.

As John Fawcett puts it in his book "No Ordinary Man":

"His voice rang out: "It is finished!" An acknowledgement of defeat some said afterwards, a despairing cry of sorrow. But it wasn't, not for those who heard it... it was altogether different – like sunshine after storm, like rain after drought, like laughter after tears – gloriously unexpected, wonderfully surprising. He had stooped and conquered, staked all and won. Defeat was victory, darkness was light, and death was life.until that moment, until that last victorious shout, he had lived with the awful burden of holding the world's fate in his hands and wondering whether he could see it through. At last it was done – he had honoured his calling, fulfilled his mission, walked the way of the cross. It was finished."

Will we make it worth his while, what he went through for us?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rN_ykOcvURw

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit “

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent”. Luke 23.46

Jesus’ first Word from the Cross begins “Father” - or in the Aramaic, Abba. This is the word he used when he taught his followers how to pray: Our Father - *Abba* - who art in heaven ... It was used at that time, and variations on it are still used by speakers of Semitic languages when talking in a close family context. Like “Mama” and “Papa”, Abba is one of the first repetitive sounds that the baby Jesus would have learned to say.

But in that dark moment on the Cross, when he cries out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, Abba was not the word he used. *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!* - Lord, Lord. Did God seem very far away? Was this a despairing cry from a Jesus fearful of what may happen to him or to his followers after his death? When we think of his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and hear that anguished cry *My God!* this could well be so. But some commentaries point out that these are the opening words of Psalm 22, a psalm that starts in deep despair but ends with the psalmist putting his full trust in God:

*To him, indeed, shall all who sleep
in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go
down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a
people yet unborn,
saying he has done it.*

Jesus may not have been in despair, but instead consoled and strengthened by a text he knew by heart. Whatever the case, with his final breath Jesus returns to that childlike closeness, entrusting his spirit to the loving care of his Father. Here Dr. John Taylor sums up his comments on this final Word:

At the beginning it was the rest of us he was thinking about - *Father, forgive them*. That prayer had been answered forever, and now his thought is fixed on the Father alone and his own homecoming. *Your hands, my spirit*. The faint pulse falters, the flame sinks, but his spirit is already soaring toward that Union like a lark ascending. So Jesus dies into God..... And now, out of the dark dissolution of Christ’s death, the hands of the Creator were about to start fashioning a new man and a new beginning. The earthquake is the herald of the Resurrection.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Nat88Uqw0>