

The Final Word
Good Friday
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Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
~Luke 23:34

Today, you will be with me in Paradise.
~Luke 23:43

Dear woman, here is your son. Here is your mother.
~John 19:26-27

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
~Matthew 27:46

I am thirsty.
~John 19:28

It is finished.
~John 19:30

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.
~Luke 23:46

Tonight, we have heard the final words of Jesus, spoken from the time of his crucifixion. There is a tradition that a person's final words have a heightened meaning – that they reflect the sum of their life's wisdom, or are insight into what is most important to the person who is dying. In Jesus' case, no matter which Gospel account you prefer, his final words uphold that tradition.

The first word is of forgiveness, for actions that are not understood. Despite his pain, emotional and physical, Jesus asked for forgiveness – not for himself, but for those who were torturing him. Of all the final words, this is perhaps the most important to followers of Jesus, especially in the ancient world. When Christians would be arrested and executed in the arena, in many cases they would follow Jesus' example, and kneel in prayer for forgiveness for others. Though we often pray for others' health, it is more rare for us to pray for each others' forgiveness – and yet, we ought to do so.

The second word is of salvation. Jesus, at this point, is already nailed on the cross. A brigand, crucified next to him, asks Jesus to remember him when

Jesus enters the Kingdom. At a time when most people would have utterly abandoned hope, this revolutionary brigand asks Jesus' help. Jesus responds that they will be together in paradise. *Paradeiso*, in Greek, literally means garden of splendor. This is the only place in all the gospels that it appears, and I like to think that Jesus is trying to make the concept of heaven understood to someone who has no pre-existing knowledge of it. The garden of splendor awaits. Salvation is coming – and Jesus, even while crucified, tries to make its meaning understood.

The third word is of relationship. Though most of the disciples have fled, men and women alike, there seem to be two that have remained with Jesus even at the end. One, his mother. Two, the “disciple that Jesus loved” – usually taken to mean John. Jesus sees that these two, who somehow have the strength to bear witness to his death, need each other's support. Both are likely already grieving, and Jesus knows that they will be strengthened by relational bonds. Mary may also need social support – an advocate, a friend to rely on in the patriarchal system of the day. John, it seems, has lost his mother – and will need guidance going forward. Jesus sees this, and reaches out from the cross to help reconnect two people to their lives.

The fourth word is usually called “abandonment,” but I think it should be of misunderstanding. After all, he is misunderstood as calling out to Elijah! It's also one of two references to the Psalms in Jesus' last words, being the opening lines of Psalm 22. This Psalm also includes the line “my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth... my enemies surround me like a pack of dogs... they have pierced my hands and feet... they divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing.” Clearly, the psalm is important to the events of that morning, but psalm 22 makes another turn, too. Here's a section from the end: “God has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the needy. God has not turned God's back on them, but has listened to their cries for help. The poor will eat and be satisfied.” Perhaps we still mishear Jesus' words today! Jesus teaches us by his example that it is ok to cry out in the midst of suffering, even if we are misunderstood. When we are suffering, it is right for us to cry out for help from God, and remember that God will have compassion on us.

The fifth word is of distress. True thirst gnaws at you, making you seek out any moisture you can find. Jesus, being truly human as well as truly God, is experiencing bodily distress. In John's gospel, the onlookers dip a sponge in cheap wine, and hook it into a hyssop branch, holding it up to Jesus' mouth for him to drink. To John, this would have been ironic in the extreme – the living water is thirsty, the blood of the communion chalice is given the worst wine, and the one without sin is offered this drink on a hyssop branch, which always was associated with cleansing. Yet, all of this together shows that Jesus had some people around him with compassion, who took mercy even on those in the process of being executed. Distress should always be followed by compassion.

The sixth word is of triumph. It is finished, it is fulfilled, it is completely altogether. For someone who had previously begged God to take this cup away – to end this time of trial – finally, it was completed. The early church saw this as obedience – that Jesus was obedient to God's will, and that this was an expression of relief. But it's more than just a contract fulfilled – Jesus has brought union between God and humanity. Here is the moment of the defeat of death – even when it seems like death has the upper hand. As Adam Hamilton puts it, "He had demonstrated both humanity's brokenness and God's love. He had offered himself fully to God as a sacrifice on behalf of humanity."

The seventh word is of reunion. It is not a request, like, "God, please take my spirit" – but a recognition, an announcement of what God has already done: "Father, I put my spirit in your hands." This is the other quote from the Psalms among Jesus' last words – from Psalm 31:5, "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Adonai, faithful God." In the end, it is Jesus' reunion with God that offers our hope for reunion with God, too. It is so beautiful to hear Jesus say these words, that he had likely heard so often that they were engraved in his mind. At our passing from this world to the paradise to come, I hope that what is engraved on our heart, from constant use and repetition, will be words of hope and reunion with God.

Forgiveness. Salvation. Relationship. Understanding. Distress. Triumph. Reunion. May these final words of Jesus carry you through to this Easter – and the Easter to come. Amen.