

Seven Last Words ...



As Jesus hung on the Cross, he uttered seven last words of great meaning to those who contemplate his Passion and Death.

For centuries the Seven Last Words have been built into various forms of devotion for the consideration and consolation of the Christian people. English Catholics of the late Middle Ages were especially devoted to this pious exercise and passed it on in latter-day prayer books.

Hear the famous English mystic, Julian of Norwich:

Suddenly it came into my mind that I ought to wish for the second wound, that our Lord, of his gift and of his grace, would fill my body full with recollection and feeling of his blessed Passion, as I had prayed before, for I wished that his pains might be my pains, with compassion which would lead to longing for God. . . . And at this suddenly I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown, all hot, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it seemed to me that it was at the time when the crown of thorns was thrust down upon his blessed head. . . . With this sight of his blessed Passion and with his divinity, I saw that this was strength enough for me, yes, and for all living creatures who will be protected from all the devils from hell and from all spiritual enemies.

This devotion may be spread over a week, commemorating one of the Seven Last Words each day, or it may be prayed as a whole devotion in a single day.

The First Word + Jesus Speaks to the Father

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” *Luke 23:34*

Jesus is praying for us. He’s praying for our forgiveness: not for vindication, not for deliverance, but for forgiveness - first for his executioners and then for all of us. The basis of his petition is that “they do not know what they are doing.” We are ignorant of the true dimensions of our wrongdoing. It’s much bigger than we thought.

What we do—the good and the bad—all has great consequence to God. It matters! We don’t really “get” the depth of evil at work in the world, in humankind, and in our hearts. Ignorance doesn’t excuse us, but Jesus sympathizes with us. God hears and answers the prayer of his beloved Son. And here’s the great thing: When we pray for forgiveness our prayer is sure to be heard and answered, for we are praying along with Jesus; our prayer is wrapped up in his prayer. Our desire for forgiveness matches his desire that we be forgiven.

Jesus teaches us to pray, by word and example, for the forgiveness of others. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” The cross of Christ has great power. It is a Tree of Life, bearing the good fruit of forgiveness year after year in our lives.

Father, we turn to you with amazed joy as forgiven people because Jesus prayed on the cross for us, for all people, for his enemies - those who were mocking him, beating him and crucifying him.

**And yet he prayed for forgiveness for us too. Lord, thank you!
Give us your Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus,
so that this forgiveness will flow through us to others:
those we live with every day,
those who have especially wronged us,
those we are tempted to fear or to hate.
In the name of Jesus, who prayed for us. Amen.**

The Second Word + Jesus Speaks to the Criminal

Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:43

The request of the thief on the cross was “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” To be remembered by Jesus: this is salvation. To be kept in Jesus’ thoughts. To be remembered and not forgotten.

We sometimes sing Isaac Watts’s hymn setting of Psalm 90: “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away; we fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.”

It’s a terrible thought. But with Jesus there is no forgetting. You are not forgotten by Jesus; you are remembered and cherished. You are in his thoughts, in his hands, for all time. Along with the thief on the cross, you are remembered before God, and you are saved. Whatever else we find in paradise, we will find Jesus, and we will be with him. Not even death can separate us from his love.

**Lord Jesus, remember us, we pray;
remember us now, today,
and remember us when you come
into the fullness of your kingdom.**

**Thank you for the encouragement of your response
to the thief on the cross: the promise of paradise,
the promise of your presence
- that we will be with you forever
and that with you there is no forgetting.**

Amen.

The Third Word + Jesus Speaks to Mary and John

**When Jesus saw his mother there,
and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby,
he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son,”
and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.”**

John 19:26-27

Jesus is concerned about others, in this case his mother. He is a faithful son. At the same time, Jesus is creating the new covenant community - an expanded family that transcends all the normal human bonds of blood and kinship. right there at the foot of the cross. That family is the universal church to which we all belong.

The clue: Jesus addresses his mother as “woman.” A bit of distancing is going on here, no doubt painful for Mary.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus says “Woman, what have you to do with me?” Mary says, “Do whatever he tells you to do.” The way to get things done, especially if you’re aiming for joy and blessing, is to do whatever Jesus says.

Who are the true mother and brothers of Jesus? “Those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (Luke 8:21).

**Thank you, Lord God,
for the good work that Jesus was performing even on the cross,
creating a new community of love—the church;
a community bound together by the saving blood of Jesus,
transcending all the barriers of national boundaries, of race,
of culture, of language—one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.**

**May we be true to Jesus’ good work on the cross,
loving and caring for one another in your church,
whoever the brother or sister in Christ may be.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.**

The Fourth Word + Jesus Cries Out

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Matthew 27:46 (also Mark 15:34)

It was high noon, but the sun refused to shine. Some say to show God’s displeasure; some say the whole cosmos joined in grief. Or we could think of the darkness as an opportunity for God to go to work in a hidden way . . . as on Mount Sinai, in the midst of the smoke and the thick darkness.

But there’s yet another way to think of this deep darkness: when God is absent, the lights go out. Jesus is working in a hidden way, in the darkness. It’s hard work, arduous labour. Hammer and nails; bone and flesh; blood, sweat, and tears; and pain, agonizing pain. Jesus is paying the high price - his own blood - for my sins, for your sins, for the sins of the world.

“My God!” Before it was “Father”—again a distancing, this time between Father and Son. Jesus felt the gap that opened up between them: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Yet Jesus says, “My God.” faith at its deepest level may be believing in God, but still crying out to him when we don’t feel his presence.

What wondrous Love is this, O my soul?

**That Jesus would take our place on the cross,
experiencing the curse, the abandonment,
the God-forsakenness warranted by our sin.**

**Thank you, Lord, that Jesus experienced God-forsakenness for us
so that we will never be forsaken by God
but will always enjoy God’s nearness and blessing.**

**In the name of our precious Redeemer,
Amen.**

The Fifth Word + Jesus is Thirsty

Jesus knew that everything was now finished, and to fulfil the Scriptures he said, “I am thirsty.” *John 19:28*

Jesus is thirsty—certainly because of his humanity, his suffering on the cross. But he is also thirsty for God (Ps. 22:14-15; 69:3).

The rich man of Luke 16 was thirsty too: “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.”

The rich man is in hell, and on the cross Jesus has allowed himself to take our place—those who are lost, those who do not have eternal life. The Living Water thirsts in our place.

A soldier offers Jesus, who changed water into wine at Cana, cheap swill to drink.

But then they pierced his side; from the wound came forth water with his blood. Because of Jesus’ thirst on the Cross, the healing stream begins to flow. And we may drink deeply from it.

O God!

**It breaks our hearts to think of the suffering
and torment that Jesus went through on the cross.**

Jesus, the Living Water, suffering thirst - for us.

**Jesus, the Righteous One,
suffering the pangs of hell—for us.**

May we on this day,

**again and again drink deeply from the well of living water
that began to flow when Jesus’ blood was shed
and his body was broken,**

so that our lives may be refreshed even unto life eternal.

Amen.

The Sixth Word + Into your hands...

**Jesus called out with a loud voice,
“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** *Luke 23:46*

You may know this prayer I learnt as a child...

*“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.”*

Do you notice the similarities between that prayer and Jesus’ last prayer before he died?

- It is the prayer of a child - the Son of God - to his Parent.
- It is a learned prayer, memorized from Psalm 31.5 - the Bible teaches us how to pray.
- It is about dying. Blessed is the child whose parents teach him or her this prayer from Psalm 90: *“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”* When I prayed this prayer as a child, I felt secure in the hands of God: *“If I die, I’ll be with God.”*
- It is a prayer of deep trust, of seeking and finding a refuge in God. God will always love us and accept us as his children for the sake of his Son. Always!
- Jesus entered death in the same way he lived each day of his life, offering up his life as the perfect sacrifice and placing himself in God’s hands...

**Father of Jesus, our Father for Jesus’ sake,
we pray that the childlike awe and trust Jesus exhibited
on the cross would become ours also.**

**We pray that we will trust you no matter what,
knowing that in your good, strong hands,
we are eternally secure.**

In the name of Jesus.

Amen.

The Seventh Word + It is Finished...

... he said, “It is finished!” *John 19:30*

What is finished?

Whose work is completed?

These three words were packed with meaning, for what was finished here was not only Christ’s earthly life, not only his suffering and dying, not only the payment for sin and the redemption of the world - but the very reason and purpose he came to earth was finished.

It is the work of Jesus and of his Father. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (John 4:34).

His final act of obedience was complete.

The Scriptures has been fulfilled

“It is finished.”

Now, at the cross, that work has been completed.

No one can add to it. No one needs to try.

We just lift the cup of salvation and bless the name of the Lord.

God’s glory shines through Jesus here, now, in full strength;
shining brightly even into the darkest places of our world today.

**Lord God, with Jesus’ work finished,
accomplished, completed on the cross,
what is left for us but to give ourselves in gratitude to you?**

And so we give ourselves to you, Lord

- body and soul, all that we are, all that we have

- as a living sacrifice of praise.

Into your hands we commit our spirits and our lives.

Receive us, accept this offering in the name of Jesus.

Amen.