

## Jesus' Last Seven Words – Good Friday meditations

**“Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” – Luke 23:33-34**

Did they really not know what they were doing? Judas knew he betrayed his friend and master. Pilate knew he had condemned an innocent man to death. The Jewish council knew they had secured a false verdict by bribing witnesses. They weren't ignorant of the facts of their crimes.

But they were ignorant of its enormity. They didn't realize they were crucifying the son of God. So Jesus asks God to forgive them. But is the forgiveness only for those who played a direct role in Jesus' crucifixion? Or is it also for each of us, who DO know what we're doing when we try to make a name for ourselves, or put our selfish interests first, or ignore the needs of those around us. Forgiveness is needed even more when we DO know what we're doing.

Forgiveness doesn't mean an absence of judgment or justice. Jesus never suggested they were right to do what they were doing. He didn't forgive and call the wrong right. Instead he forgave the wrong in order to make things right with the wrongdoer. He forgave so that the world would not be condemned, but saved through him.

*Father, forgive us when we don't know what we're doing, and please be even more merciful when we do.*

**“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” – Luke 23:39-43**

Why did this thief deserve such a reward? He was a hardened criminal who obviously had not lived a righteous life. There's no telling what atrocities he had committed against others. For his whole life, he looked upon others as prey, potential victims for his illegal pursuits.

But it's hard to pick someone's pocket when your hands are nailed to a cross. In his last breaths, the thief learned a simple but profound truth: paradise is not achievable; it is only receivable. No matter how hard we work to earn it, legally or illegally, we'll never reach the paradise we seek. We can only get there through the invitation of Jesus Christ.

The thief is rewarded for his ability to see what few others saw. He is convinced that Jesus is a king, because he asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom. When we look at the cross, do we see a dying man, a bloodied victim...or do we see a king, who welcomes us into his paradise?

*Almighty God, help us see that the paradise we seek can be found in the open arms of your Son.*

**“Dear woman, here is your son...Here is your mother.” – John 19:25-27**

If there were ever a moment we would expect a man to think only of himself, it is at the hour of his death. Yet even then, Jesus is more concerned about others. The vision of Mary reminds him of what we often forget. We know Mary as a saint, but we forget that she was also a mother: scraped knees, colic, waiting for her son to come home at night. And now, she knows the worst pain of all: watching her son die.

Are we surprised that Jesus is looking out for her? As the eldest son in the house, it was his job to provide for her, and he remains faithful. He saw to it that his mother had a home to which she could go, even as he prepared to go to his.

As the other person in this story, John learns that when you come to the cross, be prepared for a new responsibility. Jesus doesn't beckon us to the cross to watch him die; he beckons us there to give us our call. And the closer we stand to the cross, the better able we are to hear that call. We come to the cross to die to our own plans and

ambitions and accept the yoke given by the One who hung there in our place.

*Holy God, may we be as mothers and sons to each other, living out Jesus' call from the cross to take care of each other as a family bonded together by Your love.*

**“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – Mark 15:33-36**

This cry of anguish is gut wrenching. Why were these words included in the gospels? Why would we want to know that Jesus felt forsaken by God in this moment? And did God really turn his back on Jesus during this time?

When he went to the cross, Jesus took all of our sins with him. But that doesn't mean it was just your and my sins. It was the sins of all humanity. In was not just sins, but SIN itself. Christ had to feel the full effects of God's judgment for our sins. His soul had to share in the punishment of our sins. At that moment, he became guilty of the worst things you and I could do: murder, molestation, greed, and selfishness.

Do you understand now what Jesus is doing? Because God is a just God, He could either inflict punishment for our sins, or he could assume it. He endures infinite suffering in these three hours. The Father turns away from Jesus so that He never has to turn away from us. We can't fully understand what happened between God and Jesus in these hours. We can only accept the level of pain and suffering, and that it was done for us. And in the midst of this devastating time, Jesus still says, “MY God.” This was a cry of distress, but not distrust.

*Merciful God, thank you for conquering death. Help us to cry out “my God” even when we feel forsaken. Remind us that you never leave our side, even in the darkest of times.*

**“I am thirsty.” – John 19:28**

Part of the power of what Jesus is doing on the cross for us is that he is doing it as a fully human being. This is not a god going through some divine charade to make us think he's suffering. This is Jesus of Nazareth, a flesh-and-blood human, beaten and bloody and nailed to a cross. His thirst is another sign of the physical anguish he is suffering.

But his thirst is for more than just H<sub>2</sub>O. Jesus spoke often of water in the gospels. In John's gospel, he says, “If anyone thirst, let him come and drink.” Jesus promised us the living waters of baptism to quench the thirst of our souls for meaning and purpose. What a strange irony that the very person who suggested he is the source of living water is now famished in body and soul.

Jesus' cry is the cry of all who are thirsty, not just for water, but for justice and for a place at God's table. Jesus drank the cup of death, which doesn't quench thirst but heightens it. He did this so that everyone might drink from the cup of life, which we do each time we take communion. Through his death, the thirst of our souls are quenched.

*Giving God, who poured out his blood so that we might never be thirsty, help us to see the needs of others and meet them, as Christ has done for us.*

**“It is finished.” – John 19:29-30**

Indeed, it is finished. Pilate thought that with the death of Jesus, this so-called king's reign would be over and the rebellion would be squelched. It is finished.

The disciples thought that Rome had won and finally silenced their master. A dead Messiah is no Messiah at all. It is finished.

But Jesus knew what was really finished. Scripture has been fulfilled. Sin and death have been defeated. Redemption has been completed. Humanity has been reconciled to God once and for all time. His work, which he was sent to do, has been completed. It is finished.

Notice that he did not say, "I am finished." God still has more in store for Jesus in a few days. But on this day, by his death on the cross, Jesus has finished more than just his earthly life. He has finished the mission for which he was sent. When we face our own death, will we be able to look at what God has called us to do here on this earth, and utter the same words? Our lives are a work in progress. May God grant us the grace and the courage to finish them.

*God of all life, use Your power and majesty to bring to completion the work you have called us to do, just as you followed Jesus to the cross...and beyond.*

**"Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit." – Luke 23:44-46**

The first recorded words of Jesus in the gospels were when he was found in the temple and says to his parents, "Don't you know that I had to be about my father's business?" Now that business is finished, and he can say, "into Your hands I commend my spirit."

These are the last words of Jesus. There were no curses from his mouth. No loathing contempt, no self-righteous condescension, no bitter resignation. Instead, he ends his life with a prayer of faith, the same prayer that Jewish mothers taught their children to say at bedtime every night.

It's a fitting end to an extraordinary life. He was betrayed into the hands of sinners, but he was always in control of his life, and it is only at this moment, when everything is accomplished, that he chooses to give his life back to his Father. That allows God to restore Christ's spirit in the days to come.

To whom does our life belong? We don't have to wait until our dying breath to commend our spirit to God. We can choose, this very day, in the shadow of the cross, to give our life to God for His use. God wants to restore us, as well. Will we let Christ's death on the cross go unnoticed in our life, or will we choose to put our life in God's hands?

*Loving God, thank you for opening your arms to receive us. We commend ourselves to you this day, as we accept the gift of life given by your son, Jesus Christ.*