

The Seven Last Words

Of all the many things which we remember about loved ones who have passed away, of all the many things which they said to us while they lived in this world, the ones which often remain with us the most are those final moments and last words spoken just before their death. There is something about being on the threshold of eternity which inspires the dying person to express very profound thoughts, very meaningful words, to the loved ones whom they are leaving behind. Maybe you can recall how you yourself hung onto every last word of a dying mother or father, brother or sister. If such is the case with our family and friends, it is all the more true in the case of our Blessed Lord. His last moments and His last words are, to put it mildly, some of the most memorable of His entire life. In the words of Bishop Fulton Sheen: *In this sublime hour Our Blessed Lord calls His children to the pulpit of the Cross, and every word He says to them is set down for the purpose of an eternal publication and an undying consolation. There was never a preacher like the dying Christ. There was never a congregation like that which gathered about the pulpit of the Cross. There was never a sermon like the Seven Last Words.*

And so the stage, so to speak, is set for this most powerful sermon. Our Blessed Lord has now already been betrayed by Judas, interrogated and unjustly condemned by the leaders of the Jews, handed over by the cowardly Pontius Pilate, scourged by the cruel soldiers. He has been mocked, spat upon and made to wear a crown of thorns. He has carried His Cross, heavy with our sins and the sins of the whole world, falling three times along the way. Finally, he has just had large spikes driven through His hands and feet, those sacred hands which had cured so many, those feet which walked so many miles to preach the Gospel. The whole world seems to have risen up against its Creator; even as He hangs from His bloody Cross they mock this Suffering Servant; all have abandoned the Lord of Love except for a very few friends and His Blessed Mother: *He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...He was wounded for*

our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities...and All we like sheep have gone astray.... Such was the “prelude” to the first words of His sermon.

Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do. It is not insignificant that the first of our Lord’s Seven Last Words were words of mercy. St. Sister Faustina related that, if Christ could be said to have a “greatest virtue,” it would in fact be mercy. Mercy—a certain pity on another on account of his sufferings. In justice Christ could have cried out, *Father, destroy each and every one of my persecutors*; it would not have been unjust for Him to do so. “Justice” is giving to another what he deserves; and all of us deserve Hell on account of our sins. But instead His cry is one of mercy.

Scripture tells us that, after having been stoned by the people, St. Stephen spoke with his last breath the words of Jesus, *Lord, he cried, do not hold this sin against them.* This forgiveness of one’s persecutors, this love of even one’s enemies, would henceforth be the trademark of Christianity, the sign of a true follower of Jesus Christ. By Christ’s Passion and Death and ever mindful of His words, *Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy*, let us implore His mercy upon us and ask for the grace to be merciful to those who persecute us. St. Alphonsus supplies us with a prayer:

This day thou shalt be with Me in paradise. These second of the Seven Last Words were spoken by our Blessed Lord to the “Good Thief,” known to us under the name “St. Dismas.” If there is any one episode in all of Sacred Scripture which should give us hope in times of despair, it is this one. Jesus is in His last moments before His death. Next to him are two thieves, one is mocking Him, blaspheming and cursing. The other beholds this Innocent Lamb, but sees in Him not just a man who is being unjustly executed. St. Dismas looks upon Christ with the eyes of faith, and sees in Him the Savior of the World, God Incarnate, the King of Kings: *Remember me, Lord,*

when you enter into your Kingdom. Christ looked upon him, looked into the very depths of his heart; and just as Dismas saw in Christ more than a mere man, Christ saw in him more than a mere criminal. Christ saw a repentant sinner crying out on his death bed for forgiveness. *Man regards appearances, says Sacred Scripture, but the Lord looks into the heart.*

Consider how amazing this episode is. How it must have struck those watching at the foot of the Cross. Here is a man who was not numbered among our Lord's followers. He had not traveled with Him on his journeys, had not witnessed the many cures, had not spent his days in prayer. No, Dismas was out stealing and who knows what else. Crucifixion was reserved for the very worst criminals. As Dismas approached his Divine Judge he did not try to point to his many accomplishments, to his success in this life, to himself. He looked upon His Crucified Lord, considered his many sins, recognized his own nothingness as well as God's love for him, and with hope in his heart asked for forgiveness, *Remember me Lord, remember me.* And in the blink of an eye this thief became a canonized saint, the only saint to receive the words of canonization from Christ Himself, *This day thou shalt be with Me in paradise.*

Woman, behold thy son; Behold thy Mother. In the Gospel of John we read the words, *God so loved the world so as to give His only Son....* Now, this Only Son, Who so loved the world, gives His own Mother to be our Mother. Christ would soon be leaving this world. He already left us His True Presence in the Holy Eucharist the night before at the Last Supper, whereby we could be united to Him most intimately at every Holy Mass. And now, as if that were not enough, He leaves us in His own Mother's hands. How He loves us! In the midst of unspeakable suffering He is thinking of you. He knows that, even once He redeems us by His Death, we will still fall many times, we will still lose hope from time to time and need someone to lift us up. And so He gives us the Blessed Virgin to be our own Mother, to intercede for us, to pray for us, to teach us by example how to love and serve the Heavenly Father, which demands sacrifice.

Mater Dolorosa, the Mother of Sorrows is one of her titles. And how grievously she must have suffered there at the foot of the Cross—to see your own son killed right before your eyes! The pains that our sins have caused in that Immaculate Heart! And yet, like her Son, she has not and will not ever abandon us. Certainly, any one of us would have been overwhelmed on seeing our son treated so cruelly. Most of us would probably have fallen into the sin of hatred for his persecutors, would probably have spent the next months or even years with an unforgiving heart. Not so with the Blessed Virgin. Yes, of course, she was outraged at the sin, but she prayed sincerely for the sinners. We could be sure that it was by her prayers that the Good Thief, the Roman centurion and others were converted that day. We could be sure that it is by her prayers that we obtain the grace of conversion in our own lives.

My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me? There are, perhaps, no other words in all of Sacred Scripture which give us such a glimpse into the enormity of Christ's sufferings—for the Son of God to cry out with such anguish of heart! There are also no other words which perplex one so much at first glance—did the Heavenly Father really abandon His Beloved Son? No, of course not.

See, though Christ is God, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, He is also man; and in His human nature He suffered all that any man would suffer in such a horrible agony. In fact, because our Lord possessed a perfect human nature, because all of His senses, His intellect and memory were perfect, He actually felt the pain all the more acutely. And so, in His human nature He cried out because of the indescribable pain which He willingly underwent—a pain which came not only from the physical affliction, but also, and most especially, from the interior suffering caused by the sins of all men, sins committed before Christ came, sins committed by His executioners, sins committed by all who would come after Him. Every sin, every sin which ever was committed and ever will be committed caused enormous pain in His Sacred Heart. Hence it was only normal that He should cry out in such agony.

“But,” one may ask, “then why did our Lord say that God had forsaken Him?” Jesus did not fall into despair, as some heretics have believed. When He said, *My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?*, He was quoting one of the Psalms, Psalm 22 to be exact, which begins with those very words. Why Psalm 22? Any faithful Israelite who was at Calvary that day and heard those words, *My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?*—would have known immediately that Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, a psalm which foretold the coming of the Messiah, and foretold the sufferings He would endure, foretold them with such accuracy, that many of those standing near by would have seen immediately that this prophecy was being fulfilled right before their eyes. And this Psalm, which begins with such somber tones, ends in exaltation:

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; all the families of the nations shall worship before Him. Yea, before Him shall all the proud of the earth bow down. Posterity shall serve Him; men shall tell of the Lord to all generations yet to come, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn.

So by these words Christ was revealing, first, how great was the pain which He gladly suffered for us, and second and most importantly, that He was the long-awaited Messiah, that His death was the one described in this Psalm 22 and that in the end He would indeed be victorious.

I thirst. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, God-made-man, the King of Kings, cries out in His last moments, *I thirst*. We said before that the last words of a dying person are often very important, and yet these fifth words do not seem to be anything other than a simple expression of a physical need for some water. He will soon leave behind this earthly body. Why is He asking for drink?

Our Blessed Lord was abandoned by almost all: *And I looked for one that would comfort Me, and I found none* (Ps 68). His thirst is not one of a physical kind; it is a thirst for love, for the love of man, for whom He came to free from sin and eternal damnation. Once again our Lord is quoting

one of the prophetic Psalms, this time it's Psalm 68. Once again it's a psalm which describes His sorrowful Passion, but ends with a triumph: *For God will save Sion and rebuild the cities of Judah...and those who love His Name shall dwell in it.*

Our Lord once said, *Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water...shall not lose his reward.* Whoever satisfies the thirst of another helps satisfy that thirst of Christ. The love of God and the love of neighbor: that's what Jesus was thirsting for on the Cross.

It is consummated. The last two of Christ's Seven Last Words show us that throughout all of His Passion and Death Christ, true God and true Man, was in total control. He suffered willingly; He died when He Himself so willed. *For this reason, Christ said, the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.* Only God has power over life and death; and so in these words Christ shows forth His divinity.

Doctors studying the Shroud of Turin now tell us that the suffering that Jesus underwent was simply far too much for any human being to undergo. It is simply impossible for anyone to last as long as He did. And they tell us that they can see from the Shroud that He died by a rupture of the heart. It's as if He finally allowed His Sacred Heart to break after so much affliction. It absorbed all the world's hatred and then buried it all in the grave. And now that Heart which reigns in heaven is the fount of mercy from which all graces flow down to man.

Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit. The very last words spoken by Jesus Christ before His holy Death. Since the first sin of Adam and Eve death had been the most unwelcome guest to man. There was no heaven to look forward to. At the very best there was what is called the Bosom of Abraham, a sort of limbo for those who led holy lives here below. Death was feared. Even many philosophers and wise men could not explain the great mystery of death. This riddle, so to speak, was solved with Christ's Death. Now death would offer to the just a new life, one of

perfect happiness in the Beatific Vision. The unending grip of death came to an end with Christ's death. After the most gruesome suffering our Lord goes to meet death with perfect peace, knowing that it would no longer have hold over anyone who possesses a share in His own divine life.

If we desire to die a good death, said St. John Vianney, we must lead a Christian life...Death is generally the echo of life...And the way for us to prepare for a good death is to model our deaths upon the death of Jesus Christ. Can the life of the good Christian be anything other than that of a man nailed to the Cross with Jesus Christ? Consider the steps in our Lord's Death, expressed verbally in the Seven Last Words. A forgiveness of enemies; a love of the repentant sinner; a devotion to the Mother of God; an acknowledgement of one's dependence on God; a holy thirst for God's love; a complete resignation to the will of the Father; and finally, a peaceful entrance into eternity. Into Thy hands I commend my spirit.