

## **Luke 23:46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.**

By all accounts, Jesus didn't do a lot of talking on the cross. It was as if he were alone in his pain -- silent for the many hours he hung there, except for a very few words. But these 7 Last Words of Christ from the Cross provide a window into Jesus' nature, a way to understand through his own last words what is ultimately important to this One who is dying on the cross. These Words reveal his incredible love, his determination, his humanity as well as his divinity, his intimate relationship with his Father, and finally his trust.

As we contemplate that death, and the final word He utters just before He gives up His Spirit, it might be appropriate for us to remember a time when the Lord spoke with Moses. He placed Himself in a burning bush, which didn't burn up. And God told Moses before He would speak to him, that he should remove his sandals. Do you remember why? Because this place, said the Lord, is holy ground. Right now, while I am here in this burning bush that doesn't burn, this isn't just any ol' bush; this isn't just any ol' mountain. This isn't just dirt you are standing on. I am here; and that makes the very ground you stand upon holy and reverent. Take off your shoes, Moses.

Holy ground is not human-centered ground. It is God-centered ground, and is therefore more than the ecstasy of a breathtaking scenic vista or a history-making event. It is a place where the holy God, in the biblical words, "comes down" and makes Himself known to human beings. It is a place of reverence, awe and even of holy fear ... a place where heaven and earth meet. It is a place of encounter; not where we encounter God, but where first and foremost God encounters us. It is a place where God in his self-initiating love calls us by name and declares to us that we are wholly and completely his beloved children. Holy ground is a place, an experience, where God calls us, surprises us, shocks us, challenges us, empowers us and ultimately transforms us.

However, holy ground is not only spiritually quickening. It is also spiritually challenging. For when we find ourselves standing on holy ground, God does not permit us to bask in its glow for long. God calls us to action. God commissions us to undertake the holy work of his divine plan. The past two years my walk with our Lord has been much deeper. He has challenged me and grown me in ways I did not expect. Not always did I go willingly, nor have I served in ways that were comfortable to me. Nevertheless, with His call to holy action comes an even more powerful holy promise - God's promise to Moses, "I will be with you." God does not call Moses, and God does not call us, to bear the burdens of His holy work alone. God promises to be there for us, to stand beside us and to walk with us each step of the way. This does not necessarily make our holy work any less daunting, less challenging or even lessen the prospects of failure. However, it does make our holy work for God grace-filled and love-empowered, for we have the divine reassurance of God's abiding presence, God's wise guidance and the matchless resources of God's love at our side. We also bear the knowledge that in such holy work, God does not call us to be successful; God only calls us to be faithful.

Just last night at Maundy Thursday services, we experienced this holy ground. For me personally, it was the first time I have participated in a foot washing ceremony. I have avoided these for years; why, I do not know. But this year, I felt compelled to participate - challenged by the Holy Spirit in my heart. Jesus gave us one of his last commandments when he washed the feet of his disciples - "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." But who is "one another"? Is it limited to certain people because Jesus' example occurred in a secluded area with his disciples? Does it mean only our friends and family? Or church? Or community? No, I believe that Jesus meant to include others outside of our "circle of comfort". What Jesus says can apply both to earthly relationships of masters and servants as well as to

our relationship to Christ. We can see in the pages of the gospels that it also describes how Jesus approached His relationship with God the Father. He was always submissive to the Father in everything. Beyond this, God the Father is the greatest servant. On our behalf, He sustains everything we depend on for our very lives.

God has not given us the command to take off our shoes, but the point of Moses taking off his sandals was to show that he understood that this was no ordinary mountain. This is no simple church tonight in the sleepy town of Palmetto. This is not ordinary carpet anymore. This isn't a simple pulpit surrounded with banners and wood. God has come in the person of Jesus, to speak to us ... here. That makes this place "holy ground." And we too, should show that this is no ordinary cross from which Christ speaks. So, rather than take off our shoes, let us take off our sins. Let us take off our pride. For this cross – this blood, sweat and tear-stained cross, is Holy ground where God confronts us, shocks us, challenges us, empowers us and ultimately transforms us.

This is a critical point for us this evening, because Christ is not about to die as a natural outcome of being crucified. This is a voluntary act. The thieves to his right and left had not yet died. How is it that Jesus is going to die already? It is well known that crucifixions usually take anywhere from 24 to 48 hours for a person to die, and quite often they can hang there for nearly a week before dying. How is it that Jesus is about to breathe his last after only six hours? Did they pound the spikes in deeper with him than with the thieves? No. He was crucified just like the others, and others before and after Him.

Jesus did not meet death as others do. Jesus met death as death's conqueror. With a loud voice, Jesus gave up his spirit, showing that He was not compelled to die, but that He willingly submitted to death for our sake. Death did not meet Him; He met death. As He had said in the Garden of Gethsemane, He could easily have rescued Himself with more than twelve legions of angels, had He so desired.

He spoke very plainly before ever coming to the cross: "I lay down my life freely; no man takes it from me. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again." And now, this evening, with His dying breath we hear our Lord shout, "Father, into thy hands, I commend my Spirit." They don't take it from me, but I give it of myself! No wonder that heathen centurion finally admitted, "Surely, this Man was the Son of God!"

And yet, there's an ironic twist to be found here. Jesus borrowed this line again from David. Just as He prayed the first line of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" here too Jesus borrows a line from Psalm 31. David was in the midst of a conspiracy so powerful that even his friends had abandoned him. Little did he know that he was living out what our Lord would later endure. Therefore, David, and now our Lord too, cries out, "Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit."

It leads us to wonder whether our Lord was selecting Psalm 31 as a legacy for us. That entire Psalm is about enduring broken relationships and affliction and sorrow; and how the Lord is our stay as we endure them. Certainly, Jesus had experienced these things, but here in his dying breath, perhaps He is teaching us yet one last time. As he commends His Spirit to His Father, He purposely offers Psalm 31 to us. The original context for Jesus' simple prayer "Into your hands I commend my spirit" was a strong affirmation of God's faithfulness and redemption. By quoting from Psalm 31, Jesus is not only entrusting his spirit to God, but also reaffirming his ultimate trust in God, even the God who has laid upon him the sin of the world. Moreover, the fact that Jesus continues to address God as "Father" indicates his unwavering confidence in the One he has known so intimately and served so faithfully.

Throughout our lives, we rely on all sorts of things. We begin life fully dependent on our parents. Along the way, we learn to trust others and, of course, we come to trust ourselves the most. For we who believe that we are firmly in control, this may be the most radical statement of a life transformed by faith that we

find in the gospels. Jesus frees himself from the illusion of control and places his life in the hands of God. The desire for control in one's own life seems harmless enough, but Jesus understands that it is this desire that keeps us from loving not only God but also our neighbors. Thinking that we can control our future, we seize any opportunity to take more than we need, more than our fair share, and it is our neighbors who are truly in need who suffer as a result. Thinking that we can guarantee our own fulfillment, we live a life of relentless pursuit that does not have time for acts of neighborly generosity. Thinking that we can supply our own salvation, we become violent defenders of all that threatens our sense of stability and security. However, Jesus commends his Spirit to the only one with the power to give salvation. Jesus shows us that the gracious life of faith is marked not by control but by submission, not by self-confidence but by humble trust that the one who created will also redeem, that the one who breathed life at the beginning will continue to breathe life in the end, in ways that we cannot understand or imagine.

However, in the end, we put our ultimate trust in God and in God alone. We realize we can't save ourselves. We can't make eternal life happen. We can't defeat death. We can't earn our redemption. So, like David in Psalm 31, and like Jesus in Luke 23, we put our lives into the hands of God. Yet we do so with a peculiar confidence. We know that, in the mystery of the Trinity, God's hands are not only strong, but also vulnerable. They're not only healing, but wounded. The hands of Jesus, pierced on the cross, are the very hands of God. Into these hands, we can trust ourselves completely, knowing that they'll always be there to catch us, both in life and in death.

## **Closing Prayer**

As I reflect upon this final word of Jesus from the cross, I am struck, Gracious Father, by the fact that this is my prayer too. To be sure, my situation is far from that of Your Son, and I'm hopeful that I still have many more days before my life's end. But, even still, at the end of all my striving, all my thinking, all my efforts, all my attempts to figure everything out, all my deeds, both good and bad, what do I have left but to trust You?

I think of the moving words of the hymn "Rock of Ages":

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy wounded side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure;  
Save from wrath and make me pure.

Not the labor of my hands  
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to the cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless look to Thee for grace;

Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

Thou must save, dear God, and Thou alone. I have nothing to offer You, but my trust in You to save me. So, like Jesus, I commend my spirit to You today, to rely on You, to believe in You, to live for You, until that day when I stand before You, with nothing in my hand but the cross.

How good it is to know, dear Lord, that the cross was not the end for you. As you entrusted your spirit into the Father's hands, you did so in anticipation of what was to come. So we reflect upon your death, not in despair, but in hope. With Good Friday behind us, Easter Sunday is clearly on the horizon.

Amen.