

St Andrew's Chesterton, Good Friday 2017 2-3pm

Hymn My song is love unknown

I was fortunate to be with both my parents in the hours before their death and I can remember very well what they said to me.

The last words of Jesus in the hours before his death must have cost him a great effort to speak out, because of the physical effects of crucifixion. If we allow these words to lodge in our hearts they can sustain us through failure, loss, suffering and death.

They must also have been difficult to hear, which perhaps accounts for the variation in the four gospel records. This afternoon I will take each sayings in turn, with a reflection followed by the extinguishing of a candle, a response which is on the sheet, and a pause for thought. I plan to ask the same two questions each time – who is Jesus? as he speaks the words, and who am I? as I hear and receive them.

THE FIRST WORD

Luke 23:33-34

When they came to the place called "The Skull", they nailed Jesus to the cross there, and the two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Jesus said "Forgive them, Father! They do not know what they are doing."

Who is Jesus here? the one who prays to the Father, and the one who forgives. In his life Jesus scandalised others by declaring the forgiveness of sins. Remember the woman taken in adultery or the paralysed man lowered through the roof. At the hour of his death Jesus asks his Father to forgive on his behalf. This merciful word is directed to those who have had a part in his death; to Judas who betrayed him, to the religious leaders who handed him over and scoffed, to Pilate and the fickle crowd who condemned him, to the Roman soldiers whipping, nailing, and scoffing, to Peter who denied him, to the disciples who have fled, to all. To all. It is both incredible and inspiring. In the letter of St John we read, if anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. Then and now, Jesus is the one who intercedes, asking for forgiveness.

Who am I? as I listen to Jesus on the cross, these words of forgiveness reach out to me. I hear that I too can be forgiven. While I was not there at the crucifixion, I hurt God and others through my ignorance, through my weakness, through my own deliberate fault. God's forgiveness allows us to dare to look at what we are; our failures, our denials, our mistakes, our hatred, all the ugliness within our hearts. If we receive the generous undeserved mercy of God, then we can be transformed, as Peter was to be transformed when he met Jesus on the beach after the resurrection. I am a person who needs to receive forgiveness, and Jesus intercedes for me.

I am also a person who needs to forgive. Jesus' example shows me what to do, and the Lord's Prayer reminds me. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others. I am naturally a person who holds grudges. I have a long memory, and it is hard for me to let go of resentment, which then corrodes me. If we find it hard to forgive, then hearing these words of Jesus afresh may open the way for us. "Forgive them, Father! They do not know what they are doing."

Lord Jesus - you gave your life for us.

You suffered and died that we might be made whole.

THE SECOND WORD

Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals hanging there threw insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" The other one, however, rebuked him, saying: "Don't you fear God? Here we are all under the same sentence. Ours, however, is only right, for we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong." And he said to Jesus, "Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King!" Jesus said to him, "I tell you this: Today you will be in Paradise with me."

Who is Jesus here? Jesus is acknowledged by the second thief as the King, despite his humiliating situation on the cross. In the depths of his agony Jesus speaks words bringing hope to an outcast. And what a hope it is - that Jesus, who came into our world to be with us, and share our limitations, can take us with him out of this world, to Paradise. I love the word today. There is an immediacy to this promise –no mention of purgatory, or a long period of instruction, or the accumulation of good deeds. It is just today. If we are too literal then we think 'today?' how can that be, Jesus does not rise or ascend for some days to come.... but beyond death we will be in God's time. We are reminded that God's time is not ours.

Who am I? I can respond to Jesus as either of the two thieves. I can see the temptation to join in with the crowd, as the one who taunted Jesus did. I would prefer to be like the second thief – I want to receive the gift of being with God in paradise, though I do not deserve it, and have not earned it. I am also encouraged on behalf of others, that it is never too late to cry out to Christ, and that things can change very quickly even at the end of our lives.

Like the second thief, I want to ask Jesus to remember me – a very simple prayer, a prayer of longing and humility, one which I can make my own without a huge amount of intellectual knowledge or study. In the Old Testament when God remembers people he works for their good; he remembers Israel when they are in slavery, and he remembers Hannah and Rachel when they are barren. It is a prayer I would like to think I could use all through my life, and grow in confidence that even if others overlook me I am held in the memory of God. Jesus, remember me.

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THE THIRD WORD

John 19:25-27

Standing close to Jesus' cross were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time the disciple took her to live in his home.

Who is Jesus here? in the first word Jesus has spoken to God, and in the second to a stranger, now he addresses those who are intimately known to him. Throughout his life we see Jesus establishing and strengthening relationships. Good Friday saw the disintegration of the community Jesus had been building. Judas had sold him, Peter had betrayed him, and most of the disciples had run away. Jesus does not despair or give up, and speaks to those remaining at the foot of the cross. He calls Mary and John to see each other as family, an older woman and a younger man. This is not to be seen as simply a domestic arrangement, just to make sure Mary was all right; although those two would miss him acutely, but as the beginning of a much wider community stretching across history and geography and culture. Hostility, accusation and violence break up community but that is where Christ's love re-forms us, binding us together.

Who am I? now I am a person who need never be alone, even in grief and loss. When I travel and I find others with whom I can remember Jesus, as we break bread and share wine, they are my brothers and sisters. The blood which unites us is the blood shed on the cross. I am joined with the whole company of heaven. As well as seeking and enjoying that belonging for myself, I need to look out too, for those who need me to be close and supportive to them as sister or daughter or mother. It is a tough call in our modern culture with busy, private lives. What if I don't like them or they take up a lot of my time? But that is Jesus' direction to me.

Lord Jesus - you gave your life for us.

You suffered and died that we might be made whole

Hymn 181 O sacred head surrounded by crown of piercing thorn

THE FOURTH WORD

Mark 15:33-34

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Elo-i, elo-i, lama sabach-thani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Who is Jesus when he utters this dreadful cry? This central word is key to our understanding of how God himself takes on the cost of human evil doing.

Jesus is the same person who said to his disciples "When you all run away from me and leave me alone, I won't be alone, because My Father is with me." (John 16:32), and yet he seems to be doubting this. People have guessed that Jesus was quoting Ps 22, which begins with this cry – why have you forsaken me? On Jesus day the psalms were very much used in worship but they were memorised, and not numbered, and so people referred to them by the first lines.

It is easy to see why Jesus is calling the people's attention to Psalm 22. Verses 1-2, and 11-18 describe a horrific situation of agony, mocking, and impending death. Here are some other phrases found in the Psalm:

- *"All who see me mock me...they wag their heads."* – v. 7 (reference Matt. 27:39, Mark 15:29)
- *"My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death."* – v. 15 (reference John 19:28)
- *"For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet."* – v. 16 (reference Luke 24:40, Isaiah 53:5)
- *"They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."* – v. 18 (reference John 19:24)

In the midst of all this come the comforting and relevant words of verse 24, *“For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him.”* Other parts recall God’s faithfulness, deliverance, and power to save. By referencing Jesus words to this psalm, the painful depth of his cry is affirmed, In this Jesus identifies with the innocent victims of the world in their apparent neglect by God. but it is a sense of perceived abandonment.

Who am I? well I may have my own dark moments when I am overwhelmed by some kind of suffering. These words give me permission to cry out to God who seems absent, to voice my frustration, despair and longing and to believe God is with me, even though it does not seem so.

Lord Jesus - you gave your life for us.

You suffered and died that we might be made whole

THE FIFTH WORD

John 19:28

After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said
(to fulfil the scripture), "I thirst."

Who is Jesus as he speaks these words? he is God made flesh. God became an embodied person, a physically helpless, dependent babe, an adult who asked another, the woman at the well, for a drink. Here God has a bruised and broken body. Jesus hadn’t had anything to eat or drink for hours, he had lost a lot of fluid from blood and sweat so he was most likely dehydrated before they crucified him. After hanging in the sun for hours on the cross during the heat of the day we hear this very human cry for help, I thirst. We can spiritualise this by talking about living water, and thirsting for God but I believe that literally, Jesus was thirsty, and John shares this detail if for no other reason than to remind us that Jesus was fully human.

Who am I?

I am a physical being too; I am someone who feels in my body thirst, hunger and pain sometimes acutely. Sometimes our physicality dominates, perhaps especially at the end of our life or in illness, and we need to reach out to God through it. We are made in the image of God so we know that Jesus felt that thirst, and so at those times of our lives when physical need is uppermost, is not remote from us. Life in the Spirit is not detached from our most basic hungers.

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THE SIXTH WORD

John 19:29-30

A bowl was there, full of cheap wine mixed with vinegar, so
a sponge was soaked in it, put on a stalk of hyssop and lifted
up to his lips. When Jesus had received the wine, he said,
"It is finished";

Who is Jesus? as Jesus says it is finished, he is the one who has been faithful to the end. At the beginning of Lent we read of the devil tempting Jesus; saying take the easy way out, a short cut; in the garden we see Jesus saying is there another way? do I have to drink this bitter cup to the end? and even the thief taunted him, saying come down from the cross. Jesus could have used his power to end his suffering in the cross. Yet Jesus accepts all that humans do to him. In that we see God’s infinite love for us, taking and taking the

painful consequences of our actions without giving up. As he cries It is finished, it is a blessed relief to have reached the end of the agony. The word used for finished also has the sense of completed or perfected. At this point to us, it does not look good; the worst part may be ended but it looks like a crushing defeat rather than a triumph. The cross is not the whole story . The cross needs the resurrection to give us the whole picture. Death cannot hold Jesus and God raises him up. 'It is finished' is not a cry of defeat but one of accomplishment.

Who am I? firstly; I am someone who is greatly valued because God did this for me. God gave his life at great cost to win my salvation, and that is a wonderful truth.

Secondly, God calls me to be faithful in my work for him, whatever it may be, and however tired of it I may get. St Paul wrote to Timothy : the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Each of us has our calling, our race, whether it is at home or at work or in the community. We might feel like giving up on building our business, tending our plants, or being a carer. Sometimes we give our all and feel it has been in vain. Then we can be helped by remembering too, that when I have finished my part, it may not look good, but in God's reality the whole story has yet to be seen. Jesus' example encourages me to be faithful to the end.

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THE SEVENTH WORD

Luke 23:46

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

Who is Jesus? someone who had spent his life on earth in communion with his Father. This is wholly consistent with what he has been like. Once again these words are taken from a Jewish psalm, Ps 31 and v. 5. In the symmetry of the seven words we have moved back to words of prayer and faith addressed to a present God, to whom everything can be given back in a supreme act of trust. Jesus ' body may be broken and lifeless but his spirit is not dead with it. Jesus can rest after this seventh word, as in the creation story, God rests when his work is done.

Who am I as I hear these words of Jesus? I am a person who needs to follow this example. These words are spoken in the night office of compline. We can use them each night as go to sleep, Into your hands I commit my spirit. It's practice for when we breathe our last. They are used at funerals but can be linked not just to death but to life. As a short prayer of intention we can use them as we go from one setting to another, perhaps within our home or as we approach our offices or place of work. We can use them especially if we go somewhere which unsettles our spirit. Here in the UK we have a growing incidence of mental health issues, predominantly anxiety and insecurity. Here is a spiritual resource not available on the NHS. Cultivate the habit of placing yourself into the hands of the living God. Into your hands I commit my spirit.

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Canticle said together - Saviour of the world

- 1 Jesus, Saviour of the world,
come to us in your mercy:
we look to you to save and help us.**
- 2 By your cross and your life laid down,
you set your people free:
we look to you to save and help us.**
- 3 When they were ready to perish,
you saved your disciples:
we look to you to come to our help.**
- 4 In the greatness of your mercy,
loose us from our chains,
forgive the sins of all your people.**
- 5 Make yourself known
as our saviour and mighty deliverer;
save and help us that we may praise you.**
- 6 Come now and dwell with us, Lord Christ Jesus;
hear our prayer and be with us always.**
- 7 And when you come in your glory,
make us to be one with you
and to share the life of your kingdom. Amen**

Hymn 157 When I survey the wondrous cross