

Good Friday: April 22, 2011

The First Word

It all started thirty-three years ago. A child had been born to a girl out of wedlock. This child grew up to become something of a legend. He went around preaching and teaching and healing every disease. For a time it seemed like all of Israel would follow him and claim him as their Messiah. The climax came the Sunday before his death. The whole city of Jerusalem gathered and praised him. That praise was short-lived though. The Jewish leaders resented him. They spat on him, mocked him and beat him as they ran him through their kangaroo court. Then they handed him over to be crucified. This same Jewish man trudged down the streets of Jerusalem, dripping blood and sweat, as he carried his own means of execution. Welts and bruises adorned his body. The wailing of women and the taunts of angry men filled his ears. And then he arrived at the place where he was to die, named Golgotha-the place of the skull. He was laid upon his cross, fastened with nails and lifted up to die a slow, pathetic and painful death. Beside him were two common criminals, further marking out just how pathetic this man was.

His crime? He spoke the truth. For the past three years he had given his people every miraculous proof needed. Over and over again he pointed to the Scriptures and showed how these were the Scriptures that testified about him. They didn't care though. The leaders had grown to hate him. They finally asked for him to come out and admit his great lie. "Are you the Christ, the Son of God?" What else could he do but tell the truth. And for that, they charged him with blasphemy.

Any other man would have cried out at the injustice, begged for mercy, prayed for a quick death. For the one person who truly was innocent, he purposefully suffered all this. Why? What was so worth the injustice? What would drive him to the cross? The answer is summed up in one word: forgiveness. This Jewish man was not just any man. He was the Christ. He was and is both true God and true man. He came to earth to bear our sins to bring us forgiveness. Here, in the throes of pain and death, he utters the first of the famous seven words from the cross to the very people who had put him on that cross. **"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."**

That's what this all is about. The pain, the ridicule, the torment- it all is to bring about man's forgiveness. Hear now the account of Jesus' prayer of forgiveness from Luke chapter 23:

The Second Word

Luke 23:38-43

The details of the scene are so vivid – three crosses, 2 criminals. The window zooms in on the one in the middle, sign hanging above announcing the charge, written in Hebrew, Latin, & Greek so all could see it.

"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." It was true, but it didn't even come close. In the first word, Jesus prayed. In this second word, he answers a prayer – he was more than the king of the Jews.

But before we zoom in on that man in the middle. Look at the one next to him. He's painted into the background precisely because we know so little about him. Really, the only thing we know about him is that one day, about noon, he said 9 words to the Son of God on a cross, words which sum up everything the human heart can ever say to the Eternal—words that bring heaven nearer than the sound of whisper in a quiet room.

He looked to our Lord, and in him he saw his salvation. And he uttered that most fervent of human pleas: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And then you see something amazing. While Christ is waging a cosmic battle between good and evil; while Christ was enduring the pain and suffering and shame of all sin of all time, while Christ was dying...he stops and turns and talks to a thief, a thief who all his life had turned from God, a thief, who just a short time earlier, had joined the others in jeering and insulting him. Jesus stops and turns to him...

There is no one that our Lord does not love. He turned and answered that thief. And his answer swept up a soul from the yawning gates of hell and dropped him on the doorstep of heaven.

My friends, do you want to see grace, undeserved love? Do you want to see how God's forgiveness works? Do you want to see the power and the majesty of salvation won by God for us?

Look at that shadow, and in it – see yourself. See that soul deserving of every punishment promised life. See that soul snatched from hell and given heaven. Because there, in that thief, you see the soul purchased by the man on the cross in the foreground, simply labeled, The King of the Jews, your King of Grace.

Now listen. Hear your King say to you that because of what He has done – "You will be with me in paradise." Jesus' second word is recorded in Luke 23.

The Third Word

"When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride." Why? Because what I see here puts everything else in perspective. This is what was needed so that I, a sinner, could one day be with Jesus in paradise. Under this scene, what do the troubles I go through here and the things I strive for here – what do they matter?

In the grand scheme of things – nothing. In response to this, the whole realm of nature, everything I could ever own – is a tribute far too small. He has given us eternal life. Who cares about the rest? Who cares about what we go through here?

Jesus does. In this third word, Jesus proves it. Suspended between earth which had openly rejected Him and Heaven which had seemingly forsaken Him, he remembers his mother: **"Dear woman, here is your son."**

Her pain, as significant as it was, was nothing compared to his. Her worries were laughable as he battled the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Yet, Jesus remembers that woman and her needs and her care. **“Dear woman, here is your son.”**

Here our Savior reaches down into the small and ordinary things of life. Suffering all of the tortures heaven and earth could muster, his love never failed, his compassion never looked to his own gloom, but to that of the bystanders. And still today, Jesus reaches down into all the problems of your life, into the kitchen as the argument rages, through the family room where temptation beckons, to wherever you find yourself.

Here is the comfort in this third word. We may have come to this church tonight worried and anxious. You may have a problem which does not appear important to the world. You may be worrying about something which affects you alone. All of these we can bring to the one who saw through his own pain and remembered that woman standing there: **“Dear woman, here is your son.”**

John, chapter 19...

The Fourth Word

We have seen him unjustly tried. We have seen him beaten and bruised. We have seen hung up on a cross. And now we come to the climax of his suffering. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** All the torture and pain could not compare to this.

We use the phrase “hell on earth” to describe truly horrible events. A nation during war may seem like hell on earth. A family in the midst of divorce can seem like hell on earth. The loss of a loved one may feel like hell on earth. But we can’t even begin to fathom just what that phrase truly means. Simple words can never fully bring across just how horrid this was.

Just think about what he’s saying. “I have been forsaken by God.” The Father turned his love and compassion away from Jesus. God was still there. But if you take away his love and compassion, what’s left? Only his anger and wrath against sin. It’s hard to conceive what this felt like, what this meant. The closest I can come is realizing that for that moment on the cross all the torment and pain of hell that was stored up for us was placed upon him. If each person’s sin was a 100-pound weight, imagine all of those weights being heaped onto Christ. To die would have been a relief. But he still breathed. He was alive and feeling the terrible pain of hell, the terrible pressure of our sins. God’s wrath against sinful man from day one of the Fall until the end of this world, all of that fierce, terrifying hatred against sin was zeroed in on Christ. He truly experienced hell on earth. He truly felt that loss of God’s love and favor. He truly was forsaken by God, condemned for sins that were not his own. He suffered hell for us.

Hear his prayer of agony from Matthew 27:

The Fifth Word

While the fourth Word shows us the unbearable spiritual anguish, this fifth word reminds us that the suffering existed in his body as well. **I thirst.** By the thirst of His body, he

was quenching the thirst of human souls. As Augustine said, ‘Our hearts are restless O Lord until they find rest in you.’ And our thirsting would never be quenched had Jesus not taken this suffering. But, according to God’s promise – our Savior thirsted, so our thirst is quenched. John chapter 19...

The Sixth Word

Do you see it scrolled on the base of that cross? Tetelestai. It’s what this whole scene means. Tetelestai. Translation: It is finished. It stands finished and will always be finished. The battle that started with a serpent and just the slightest bit of doubt, that led to a simple bite of fruit...that battle, now is finished. The serpent’s head is crushed. Satan is powerless. It is finished. Tetelestai.

It’s a word that archaeologists have found marked on bills, notes of debt – “Paid in full” – Tetelestai – it has been paid and nothing more is owed. Do you see what is happening in this sixth word? Having completed the promised suffering, after answering every prayer - Once more our Savior raises his head and that magnificent word rings out over the hill and the world like the trumpet of salvation. You see, as he died, he won. Every thorn in his crown was becoming a shining jewel in his diadem of glory. The nails in his hands were being forged into the scepter of a King, and his wounds were clothing him with the purple of empire.

He won! And all things were now made new. Humanity was redeemed, and from that moment on, the eternal fate of all men of all ages would be determined by this scene.

Now, we live in freedom and in joy because we live by faith in that cry, “It is finished!” Our salvation is sure; our life is safe; our destiny is certain.

Jesus proclaims it in John chapter 19.

The Seventh Word

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And he died. It had seemed like some sort of tragic accident, some cosmic mishap that the Messiah was unjustly executed. I can understand the disciples’ confusion. Things had seemed to be going so well. They proudly marched next to him just a few days before as “Hosanna’s” filled the air. Then there was his betrayal, his trial, his torture and his death. But this wasn’t a mistake. Yes, it was terrible. But we also should see this as the greatest blessing that God has given us. Jesus didn’t just accidentally die. He willingly gave himself up on our behalf. He willingly suffered hell for us. And he willingly gave up his spirit, shouting nice and clear for all to hear.

It wasn’t a mistake. Earlier Jesus had told his disciple, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord.” Jesus willingly endured all pain and anguish, all for you. Think of what this means. A right relationship with our heavenly Father has been restored all on account of Christ’s innocent suffering and death. Now, when your last day comes, you can take comfort that it won’t be some mistake. When our last hours come, we have the comfort of knowing that

we belong with our Father in heaven. At that time you can close your eyes and say the same prayer: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Listen to the triumphant prayer of Christ, who, having endured the cross for our sake, looked forward to the joy of heaven, the same joy we also have. We read from Luke 23: