

Palm Sunday: A Reflection on the Words of Christ on the Cross.
 Reading: Matthew 27:11-54
 Focus: Christ, even as He is on the cross, forgives, restores, establishes relationships, and is reunited with the Father!
 Function: We are to believe Christ is and is triumphant!

My dear friends,
 God's grace and peace be upon you!

Our traditional Palm Sunday worship at St. Paul's church would begin with a procession of the children. The children would be carrying and waving palms in the air, circling the sanctuary twice. It is a festive way to begin the worship service.

But soon thereafter in our worship service, the mood would change—dramatically change. Traditionally on this Sunday, we read the "Passion of our Lord" from one of the gospels. The Passion readings are spoken out loud from the congregation.

At one point in the reading, the entire congregation shouts out: "Crucify Him."

The festive mood is gone. The mood is somber, almost to the point of despair. For it was the sins of the world, including our own sins, that Jesus died on the cross. It is hard to bear such a thought.

In the grief of our hearts, we cry out, "Why did You have to die like this, Christ?"

If we only heard Christ's words from the cross in Matthew's gospel, it would intensify our grief. For in Matthew's gospel, the only words we hear are the words known as "The Words of Abandonment." I know Matthew had his reasons for only including these words. Even so...

...for us, this year is different. Because of the fear of spreading the Corona Virus, we worship virtually. And so, this year, instead of hearing from only one of the gospels, we will hear from all four gospels. We will reflect on what is known as "The Seven Words of Christ." These are the words spoken by Christ while suffering on the cross.

The first words spoken are Words of Forgiveness.

From the gospel of Luke:

***"And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
 And they cast lots to divide his garments."***

(Luke 23:34 ESV)

The soldiers nailing Jesus to the cross were just doing their job. And what an awful job it was to crucify someone. And yet, in the midst of His pain, Christ asks the Father to forgive them. Amazing. Jesus is still doing what He was sent to earth to do: To forgive.



In the second words from the cross, it is Christ himself who forgives. Mathew writes of everyone mocking Jesus, the soldiers, the chief priests, the Pharisees, even including the two thieves also being crucified with Him. But Luke's gospel tells a different story of the two thieves. One criminal blasphemes Jesus, saying, "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us." [v.39] The other criminal worships Him, asking Christ to remember him.

Jesus then says to him:

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

(Luke 23:43 ESV)

These words of forgiveness by Christ teach us that repentance is never too late. Christ was looking to forgive even as death comes nearer and nearer. The criminal is restored and justified by faith. Christ's words of forgiveness are sheer grace.



The third words spoken by Christ come from the gospel of John:

***When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple
whom he loved standing nearby,
he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!"
²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"
And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.***

(Joh 19:26 ESV)

Jesus created a new relationship between His Mother and His disciple. Jesus worried about their grief, and gave them to each other for their mutual support. How incredible that even as Jesus was dying, he was worried about others. Throughout His ministry, Jesus forgave, Jesus restored, and Jesus created relationships for people with God and with one another. Even on the cross, Jesus was still doing His Father's will.



The next words are found in Mark and Matthew. These are the "Words of Abandonment."

***"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying,
"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is,
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"***

(Mat 27:46 ESV)

It is at this point that most Bible commentators say that Jesus took on the sins of the world. For Jesus it meant a crushing separation from the Father, for sin does separate us from the Lord. These words of Christ are a direct quote from Psalm 22, verse 1. Matthew's gospel is always focused on Jesus as the fulfillment of Holy Scripture. The Old Testament speaks of a suffering servant, prophesied by Isaiah. The suffering servant was to be the Messiah. Jesus is the suffering servant. Jesus is Messiah.



The next words are from John:

***After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished,
said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst."***

(Joh 19:28 ESV)

The humanity of Christ comes through in this verse. There is no denying: Jesus was truly human, and truly divine. Such pain was His on the cross...



The next two sayings of Christ, His last two words from the Cross, are Words of Triumph, Fulfillment, and Reunion.

From John:

Jesus said, "It is finished."

(Joh 19:30 NIV)

These are words that tell us not that Jesus' life is finished, [even though it is], but tells us His Mission on Earth is finished! He has triumphed. The sins of the World are forgiven. From the words of that beautiful hymn: What wonderous love is this!



And the last words spoken by Christ comes to us from Luke:

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

(Luke 23:46 ESV)

And so, Jesus is reunited with the Father. And we are forgiven by what Christ has done. Incredible.



I don't know why Christ had to die like this. There are atonement theories, that God is a God of Grace and Justice. These theories say someone has to pay the price of sin. Perhaps so. We are humbled as we are grateful.



One more significant point from Matthew's gospel today: The first person to confess Christ as the Son of God after his death was the Centurion soldier and those with him. St. Matthew writes:

***“When the centurion and those who were with him,
keeping watch over Jesus,
saw the earthquake and what took place,
they were filled with awe and said,
“Truly this was the Son of God!”***

(Mat 27:54 ESV)

2000 years later, we too can say of Christ: “Truly this was the Son of God!”

And because of the love of God as found in Christ Jesus, next week, Easter Sunday, we will hear of even more incredible things...

May the Lord bless you all this day. Amen.