

Beneath the Cross of Jesus

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, in all your words most wonderful, assist us by your Holy Spirit as we now reflect again on your last words spoken from the cross. Fill them with fresh meaning for each one of us here. Help us to hear them with understanding, to receive them with penitence, and to respond to them with faith. Grant we may grasp something more of the breadth and length, the height and depth of your love which surpasses knowledge. We ask this for your love's sake. Amen.

This morning we remember with penitence and gratitude the agony and shame, the darkness and desolation that Jesus endured on Calvary for us, and for the redemption of the whole human race.

As we meet under the shadow of the cross we pray we may understand something more of what it cost the Holy One to bear away our sin, so that we may love Him more deeply, follow Him more closely and serve Him better day by day.

We'll look at three of the last seven last words of Jesus from the cross, the ones from John, chapter 19 and have a moment of quiet meditation and prayer after each one.

The first word is from 'Jesus the loving son'.

Verses 25-27 - READ.

It is not correct to say that Jesus was totally alone at the end. Certainly his disciples had run away when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter had denied him three times in the High Priest's courtyard. But here at the cross there were four women who loved him and there was John, the beloved disciple. It would have taken real

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courage for them to be at the cross. It is always dangerous to associate with someone condemned as a dangerous criminal about to die. But their love for him overcame any fear they had. As John was to write later on, 'There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear'. (1 John 4:18)

So who were these four women? First there was his mother, Mary. The prophet Simeon had told her at Jesus' birth, 'a sword will pierce your own soul'. (Luke 2:35). And now as she watched her oldest son die a criminal's death on the cross, that was happening. Second there was Mary's sister, unnamed here, but in Mark and Matthew, she is Salome, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John. She was the one who asked if James and John could have places of honour in Jesus' kingdom. She was a pushy mother who got a firm rebuke from Jesus. Though rebuked, here she was at the cross. That says much for her and much for Jesus. Third, was Mary, wife of Clopas. We know nothing about either of them. She was just an ordinary unknown follower of Jesus, showing love as best she knew how. How like most of us. And finally, there was Mary of Magdala, from whom Jesus had cast seven evil spirits. She would never forget the deliverance and freedom of her new life as a result of what Christ had done for her. His love and power had rescued her and as a result her love for him would never die.

This varied group of believers were bound together by their love for him.

But now Jesus must provide for his mother. His earthly father, Joseph, had died and so as the oldest son he had responsibility for his mother. He could not commit her to the care of his brothers because they did not believe in him yet. (John 7: 5). That came later. Here was John, whom he loved, and who loved him. He was to be Mary's protector and provider.

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As one commentator says, 'There is something infinitely moving in the fact that Jesus in the agony of the cross, in the moment when the salvation of the world hung in the balance, thought of the loneliness of his mother in the days when he was taken away. Jesus never forgot the duties that lay to his hand.'

Well, what of us? Who should we be showing care and concern for at this time?

Silence.

Let us pray: We thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, that by the travail of your passion you brought to birth the new redeemed family of the Church, in which your love changes all our relationships. Draw us as believers close together at the foot of the cross. Teach us to welcome and care for one another in obedience to your word; and unite us in a fellowship of compassion as members of one family, to serve our Father's kingdom and to do his will, to the glory of his name, Amen.

The second word is from 'Jesus the human sufferer'.

Verses 28, 29. - READ.

We now come face to face with the human suffering of Jesus. When he was on the cross, Jesus knew the agony of thirst. He knew the end was close. The physical agony of crucifixion was considerable. You may remember the scene in Mel Gibson's film, 'The Passion of the Christ'. But so too was the spiritual burden of bearing the sin of the world.

And the cry, 'I thirst' speaks to us of that pain and agony, the physical and spiritual suffering.

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He'd spoken earlier of a cup, the cup of suffering. In the Garden had he not prayed, Father, if it be your will take this cup from me. But yet, not my will. but yours be done'? Now was the time to drink the cup which the Father had given him the cup of suffering.

Why did Jesus have to suffer so? Because he was taking the just judgement of God in place of us. He was actually rescuing us, failed and failing human beings. He had to become like us and to be our substitute, experiencing separation from his Father, so our sin could be dealt with and we could be forgiven. He had to become what we are in order to make us what he is. This is why he came. And it involved suffering for sin, our sin.

There is nothing in our experience of life that he has not touched, but he has gone deeper. He knew the depths of human pain and suffering. He suffered for our sin, such was his love for us.

(Silence)

Suffering Lord, you thirsted for us on the cross that the longings of our souls might be satisfied: help us sinners to thirst after you and your righteousness, that your passion may not have been in vain. For your sake, Amen.

The third word on the cross is from 'Jesus the victor over sin'.

Verse 30. - READ.

We've just seen the human suffering of Jesus, but here we are face to face with the triumph of Jesus.

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The other three gospels tell us simply that Jesus died with a great shout. But John tells us what that shout was. In Greek it was all one word, 'tetalesti'. It means 'It is finished' or 'it is paid in full'.

It wasn't the moan of the defeated. It wasn't the sigh of patient resignation. It was the triumphant cry recognising that he had fully accomplished the work he had come to do.

All that the prophets had foretold - he had finished.

All that the Father had sent him to do - he had finished.

All that power over sin that binds and controls people had been broken - he had finished.

All that darkness, ignorance, falsehood and prejudice that diminishes individuals had been overcome - he had finished.

There is no more saving from sin needed, no more paying the penalty, no further sacrifice required. It is done. It is finished.

There is a modern Christian song by Graham Kendrick called 'The price is paid'. The first verse and chorus go like this:

The price is paid: come let us enter in, to all that Jesus died to make his own. For every sin more than enough he gave, and bought our freedom from each guilty stain.

The price is paid – alleluia, amazing grace so strong and sure. And so with all my heart, my life in every part, I live to thank you, for the price you paid.

It wasn't a sad ending. It was a triumphant victorious one as he overcame evil, sin and death and opened the gate of heaven to us.

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It is finished.

(Silence).

Let us pray: Victorious Lord, you accomplished on the cross our complete salvation; help us sinners not only to receive your salvation but to work out its consequences in our daily lives with awe and reverence, knowing that it will be completed when you return in triumph on the last day. For your sake, Amen.