

ST BART'S



Ash Wednesday 2016

Meditations on The Seven Last Words of Christ

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ST BART'S

A Meditation by
The Rev. John F. Wirenius, *Deacon*

The First Meditation: “*Father, forgive them...*”

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, March 25, 2016
Good Friday, Based on Luke 23:34*

When I graduated law school, my parents took my sister and me to England, the one place I had always wanted to visit. My mother worked for a travel agency, and we were on a bus tour of England and Scotland. We stopped at Oxford for a day, and Cambridge. We saw Stonehenge, and the moors where the Hound of the Baskervilles hunted.

One day, we visited Coventry and pulled up in front of a very modern, frankly not all that impressive cathedral. As we piled off the bus, I wondered why we were even stopping there. As we went around, I saw why.

The outer walls of the old cathedral, a medieval masterpiece, had survived the bombing of the cathedral in November 1940, the height of the blitz. Nothing else had, mind you. The windows, gone; the roof, fallen in. Utter devastation. And not just the Cathedral.

That night, 568 were killed; approximately 1200 people were injured, 863 of them seriously. Nearly 8,000 houses were either destroyed outright or required evacuation for repair.ⁱ

The next day, Richard Howard, the Provost of the Cathedral, chalked on the wall of the ruined sanctuary the words “Father, Forgive.”

Later, when it was safe to inspect the still smoldering ruin, the cathedral stonemason, Jock Forbes, found two of the roof beams, still linked, charred and twisted though they were, forming a cross. Forbes set the beams up behind an altar made from the rubble. Our tour guide told us that the first service said was for the souls of the German pilots, as well as for those killed in the air raid.

The altar read simply, “Father, Forgive.”

As I stood in the middle of that ruined cathedral, long after the others wandered into the shiny new one, I couldn't take my eyes off that cross, off that inscription.

“Father, Forgive.”

I couldn't take my eyes off it because I had only recently read that in late 1940, the threat of invasion still loomed over England. And that if a beachhead were established by that invasion, “all would be lost, for it is a peculiarity of England's island that its southern [portion] weald is indefensible against disciplined troops.”ⁱⁱ

With their cathedral and large parts of the City destroyed, who could blame the people of Coventry if they wanted revenge? Or even if they just wanted safety, and the defeat of the invaders? But they forgave.

And this act of forgiveness was not done after the fact, from a position of safety. In fact, the people of Coventry forgave their attackers even when the forces of evil looked to be poised to triumph over them. They prayed for their attackers to be

forgiven when it looked like the damage was not just incalculable, but irreparable. They forgave when it seemed that all was lost.

A few weeks later, on Christmas Day, Provost Richard Howard of the Cathedral spoke over the radio from the ruins. He asked those who were listening “to banish all thoughts of revenge” and called on them to “make a kinder, simpler world—a more Christ-Child like world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We’re a long way from that kinder, simpler world Richard Howard prayed for on that Christmas Day here, this afternoon. Even though Lent started early this year, it feels further away from Christmas than I would have thought possible.

No, we’re here on Good Friday, 2016. Just three days after a terror attack in Brussels on Tuesday claimed at least 30 lives.

And here we are, in the shadow of the Cross.

“Father, forgive them, for they know what they do.”

How hard it is to say those words with anything like conviction. It’s like that part of the Lord’s Prayer, when we ask God to forgive us for the hurts we inflict, just like we forgive the people who have hurt us. I don’t always say that part of the prayer with the intentionality it deserves.

But Jesus did. And Jesus does.

Maybe it’s because He knows us better than we know ourselves and is able to understand how easy it is to fool ourselves into the worst betrayals, the worst crimes. After all, Peter has denied him out of fear, Judas has sold him for profit, the Temple authorities have betrayed him to the Romans, and the Romans—well, imagine the betrayal of finding in the occupier of your nation someone who gets it, knows that you’re not guilty, and then, as a matter of politics, sends you to death anyway.

And yet, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

In my Catholic boyhood, I was taught to understand that line to mean that the whole cast of characters who betrayed Jesus that night and that day would have acted better if they knew he was the Messiah. And, yes, that’s one way to read it. But it’s an easy way, one that lets us off the hook. It protects us from the duty to forgive.

So here’s another. Bernard Shaw’s play *St. Joan* has a character in it, an English chaplain, who is delighted when Joan is captured. He argues against the Church authorities’ efforts to get her to confess and recant, and he wants to see her tried and executed as a heretic.

And, after he gets his wish, and she’s sentenced to death, he goes to see.

He comes back, a broken man and says:

You don't know: you haven't seen: it is so easy to talk when you don't know. You madden yourself with words: you damn yourself because it feels grand to throw oil on the flaming hell of your own temper. But when it is brought home to you; when you see the thing you have done; when it is blinding your eyes, stifling your nostrils, tearing your heart, then--then--

The chaplain can’t finish the sentence: the enormity of his own guilt is too much for him. He has realized what his own self-righteousness has helped bring about, and his heart is shattered at the pain he has caused.

He knows what he has done, all too late.

Like Peter, like Judas, perhaps even like Pilate. Like Paul in Acts, when the scales fall from his eyes. Only afterwards do they understand the enormity of what they have done.

And not just because Jesus was the Messiah. Because they have, in betraying Jesus, betrayed what was best in them.

As we do, as I do, when we burn bright with self-righteousness at the terrible things that happen in our poor world, and give ourselves permission to hate whoever we think is responsible for them, to deny their humanity. As we do, as I do, when we feel that wonderful sense of justified anger, and give into it. As we do, as I do, when we accept an unjust status quo, and convince ourselves that there is nothing to be done. That so the world is, when in fact it is so we have made the world.

Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do.

¹ <http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/blitz/stats.php>

¹William Manchester, *Winston Spencer Churchill-the Last Lion: Visions of Glory* (1983), p. 3.

³R.T. Howard, *Ruined and Rebuilt: The Story of Coventry Cathedral, 1939-1962*, p. 22 (1962).



ST BART'S

A Meditation by
The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

The Second Meditation: "**Today you will be with me in paradise.**"

*Good Friday Meditation preached on March 25, 2016
Based on Luke 23:39-44a*

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, March 25, 2016
Good Friday, Based on Luke 23:39-44a*

Paradise isn't a word I use often. It's not even a word I hear very often. I spent some time wondering if this might be somehow problematic ...

I did once visit Paradise Island in the Bahamas. I remember seeing, many years ago, the film "Cinema Paradiso" and being quite taken with it. I love the exotic Bird of Paradise tropical flowers. We may hear something like, "That marsh is a birdwatcher's paradise." I remember seeing one couple returning from their honeymoon—from the way they looked at each other, I was pretty sure their honeymoon had been paradise. But when the honeymoon is over, we may say, "Uh-oh—looks like there's trouble in paradise."

We tend to use the word paradise now to mean a place that is beautiful, pleasant, or peaceful and seems to be perfect, or to mean being in a state of complete happiness, bliss, delight.

The word as used in Jesus' time derived from an ancient Persian word meaning an enclosed garden, a park—shady, well-watered, planted with trees bearing fruit. In Genesis, it refers to the Garden of Eden, where humans dwelled before "the fall." The Song of Solomon abounds with the imagery of a lush, blooming, fruitful, fragrant garden.

In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the word transitions to a religious term. In the Hebrew Scriptures, paradise became associated with the realm of the righteous dead awaiting the resurrection of the body—an intermediate state.

The Christian Scriptures (our New Testament) understands paradise in terms of its Jewish heritage. In the Gospels, in Paul's writings, in Revelation, we hear paradise refer to both an intermediate state and the final kingdom.

"Today you will be with me in paradise." This very verse from Luke marks a startling turning point. The penitent criminal—the criminal who takes responsibility for his own actions, confesses and repents, asks Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus' answer: "Today you will be with me in paradise." TODAY. Paradise is no longer some future state awaiting the messiah's presence at the end of the age. It is NOW.

This verse has bothered people over the years. Wait just a minute—that criminal wasn't baptized, he didn't receive communion, he didn't say the Creeds, he never darkened the door of a church. Looks like this guy got a short cut, a free pass. They note that Paul talked about a general resurrection at Jesus' Second Coming. So how did that guy get to paradise—to heaven—that very day?

When Augustine (4th century) saw that some people were troubled by this story, he had these words of wisdom, which I'll paraphrase slightly:

There is one case of death bed repentance recorded—

Do not despair; one was saved.

But only one was saved—do not presume.

Which, as you can imagine, led to arguments and hair-splitting over who is “saved” and who is not. Arguments and hair-splitting that are still going on today, 1600 years after Augustine.

I don't think such arguments and hair-splitting are helpful, or even the point. The more important focus here is how Jesus extends mercy and compassion—in the most extreme circumstances—to “one of the least of these.” To someone who in our judgment—not God's judgment, but ours—is unworthy.

Mercy: compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone who has offended us, or someone we have the power to punish or harm. How often do we have that choice? Do we extend the punishment that's deserved? Do we pass judgment? Or do we choose the merciful, the compassionate path?

Recently, when our Bible Study group was discussing the parable of the Father and Two Sons, they quickly related that parable to this very story of Jesus and the criminal. In the parable, the younger son (often called prodigal) returns home in shame and disgrace, having acted as badly as any son ever could. He doesn't even get to apologize before his father runs—runs!—to meet him and gives him a bear hug, welcoming him home and immediately reinstating him to his position within the family. We'd all say, wonderful, happily every after—except for that older brother, who is resentful and judgmental ... Reactions most of us know only too well.

The Bible Study group pointed out: interesting that, because of that older brother detail, we tend to question the “fairness” of how the parable's returning son is treated. In contrast, we tend to accept, gratefully, this account of Jesus welcoming the criminal into paradise with him. Maybe, they said, that's because we don't have an account of the other criminal complaining about it.

You may know that Pope Francis launched the Jubilee Year of Mercy this past December, saying: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.”

Pope Francis explained his reason for proclaiming Jubilee Year of Mercy this way:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of [God]. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us ... For this reason I have proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as a special time for the Church ... a time to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them ... How much wrong we do to God and [God's] grace when we speak of sins being punished by [God's] judgment before we speak of their being forgiven by [God's] mercy ... We have to put mercy before judgment. [1]

Pope Francis' words were addressed to the Roman Catholic Church, but—as with many of this Pope's words and actions—they reverberate around the world, transcending old barriers. We would do well to heed these particular words.

At the end of Graham Greene's novel *The Heart of the Matter*, a priest speaks to the widow of a man who has committed suicide; she knows the church's teaching on this matter and fears for her dead husband's eternal soul. The priest replies: “The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart.” God knows, of course; and God is always superabundant, always in excess, never hemmed in, never straining the quality of mercy. [2]

Let's not forget that God is full of surprises.

None of us knows with any degree of certainty what happens after this life on earth. As a matter of faith for some of us, we believe that life is changed, not ended. What we *can* be sure of is God's mercy and compassion. This story invites us to spread the Good News of God's kingdom—God's boundless mercy—and to “never tire of extending mercy, to be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort.” [1]

If you have ever received mercy and compassion, then you know what paradise feels like.

[1] <http://www.thedivinemercy.org/mercysunday/ewtn/2015/story.php?NID=6281>

[2] <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-03/do-not-presume>



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

The Third Meditation: " ***Woman, here is your son . . . here is your mother.***"

*Good Friday Meditation preached on March 25, 2016
Based on John 19:26*

Jesus was crucified at the Place of the Skull, where so many others had been murdered by the Romans, where the Romans had crushed the spirits and bodies of the people of Jerusalem, one of so many occupied peoples under their boot. Crucifixion was a way to end your life, but also to take your story away from you. To take your good name away. It was part of the process of humiliation that the death would happen in public, not too far from a road leading into the city. Some would jeer to join the Romans in their cruelty, to gain some comfort by the defeat of a "bad guy." Most would likely be going about their business, with not much more than a passing glance. After all, how many crucified men had there been? It's hard to keep track of them all. And if you looked too long, perhaps the Romans would start asking about you, taking your basic human sympathy as a sign of your being a political sympathizer, and then you'd end up on a list somewhere.

But there were a few who were there to stand **with** him. As popular as Jesus had been, there were only a few whose love overrode the fear of their own death. By his cross stood some of his friends. His aunt. And his mother. They were willing to risk their lives to be by his side as his body was broken and his life was slowly drained from him by the soldiers. They would have been able to look him in the eye, in all of it. I wonder what they said to him? What can one say? It is difficult enough to muster the proper words at someone's deathbed. But this? How do you be with your friend when he's on the rack? How do you be with your son? Unable to comfort him, to hold him close, to cradle him as she once did. How did she bear to hear all the tortured breaths that led up to his last and be so far away from him?

Jesus mustered a few of his last breaths to speak. And not curses, but blessings, scripture, forgiveness, mercy. And this word, "Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother." He said this to the "beloved disciple," the only one with the courage to stand by him and his mother at this time. Who better to care for her? Who better to pick up the pieces that he had left behind in his fidelity to God?

This Good Friday is also the Feast of the Annunciation, according to our trusty calendar. It's the day that young maiden in Nazareth said yes to God by saying yes to a new life springing from her. But also saying yes to a broken life, stolen from her and pierced by the powers that be. How did old Simeon put it, when she brought her precocious child to the Temple? "This child is destined to be a sign that will be rejected; and you too will be pierced to the heart. Many in Israel will stand or fall because of him; and so the secret thoughts of many will be laid bare."

Lord, you are hard on mothers. In their children, you lay them bare. The cup that their child drinks, they drink. They suffer in their coming and in their going.

Some have said that this word of Jesus' is deeply symbolic. That this is a sign of how the fellowship of the love of Christ creates new relationships, a new kind of family that overrides the old kinds of family based on bloodlines. How did they put it once? "The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb." It is not our history that matters most, it is our promises, our commitments, our loving covenants with one another that matter the most. These words may stand as a

sign that life in Christ gives us a new family bound by love instead of lineage, but these words are so practical, primarily about this woman, this mother, Mary, and her son's deep longing for her to be safe in a world that is destroying him. And she would be safe, broken but safe.

She would be cared for, not only by the beloved disciple, but by the entire community of Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem. How many of them was she like a mother, too, in the end? You can see mosaics where she is the presider over the worship, hands up like a priest. You can visit her tomb, where she was laid to rest by her new family. Or you can visit the place where some of her family saw her go to heaven. Take your pick, they are all beautiful.

ST BART'S

A Meditation by
Ms. Kije Mugisha Rwamasirabo, *Seminarian*

The Fourth Meditation: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, March 25, 2016
Good Friday, Based on Mark 15:33-37*

In the summer of 1982, in the month of June, for the very first time, I experienced a certain kind of persecution.

Mom and Dad "called it quits."

It was more of a spring-like day than a summer day, but the drama that unfolded on that day in June of 1982 was bitterly cold from the inside out. I, Kije, my Daddy's little girl, was losing her hero. I'll never forget. It was as if it was just yesterday. But it was almost exactly 33 years ago.

Gita, Mom's former boss who also played the unrelenting role of "Mom's Mother of Russian descent," began the rescue operation from 136 West Allens Lane in Mt. Airy, Philadelphia...right down the street from the Lutheran Theological Seminary where my father was a seminarian.

"John!! Enough is enough!! You have abused this girl Jane and her daughter Kije for too long!!!" Gita said in a screaming, scorching voice. "Why don't you get some help, John?...You can't keep living this way with your womanizing...your drinking and joblessness...you are ruining your home and you're destroying your life, John!!!"

Gita and Dad were having a shouting match while Mom, my cousin-brother Richard and I were crying. I was six and one-half years old and would turn seven the following month. I cried and screamed so much that Gita, Auntie Rose and Mom had to literally carry me from the house. I wasn't only crying because I was leaving my hero, Daddy, I was also crying for my cousin, really like my brother—Richard—who didn't want to be left behind.

"Daddy! Can you please keep us together? Please! Please, Daddy, please...My heart is breaking. Please, Daddy. I love you. Please don't let us go. Don't let us go. Daddy, don't let me go. I love you."

I chanted these words—continuous wailing and screaming—as Daddy cried, too. The police were there as a backup along with some lawyer/legal person from Mom's firm.

Mom, Gita and I finally left. As soon as I entered the back seat of Gita's car, I fell asleep. I woke up and Mom was sitting silently. She looked as though she had just died but was still breathing. I looked at her and she was like a stone. No emotions. No facial expression. Just numb.

Later that day we arrived at Gita's home and Mom and I spent a few nights there. For the next several weeks, I, Kije, got to experience for the first time what it feels like to be fatherless and homeless. Forsaken.

After Mom and I left Gita's home, we ended up spending a few nights at Mom's office. We were hungry, and life changed overnight. I remember asking Mom around the third day sleeping in her office, "Mommy, are we homeless? We don't have

a home anymore, and we don't have any food. Mommy, I can't eat any more of these ruffles plain potato chips. They've turned green and my stomach is hurting."

For the next several weeks, Mom and I were internally displaced persons. We moved from house to house all over the Philadelphia metro area, trying to find a safe place to sleep and to at least have a decent meal. I remember being angry, sad and confused. I didn't know what was going on and had no idea what the next day was going to bring. I knew that Mommy and Daddy didn't really like each other, as I never remember them laughing or being calm around each other. I remember always trying to bring all of us in the home together, but it never happened peacefully. The police were so familiar with our home to the point that the officers knew all of us by first name: John, Jane, Richard and Kije.

Mom and I found refuge with Mom's friend Rose, who had also recently gone through a divorce. She successfully escaped the pain she had undergone from physical abuse from her first husband, Christopher. We lived with Auntie Rose, who had a one-bedroom apartment we all shared. I slept on the mattress in the sitting room, Mom got the sofa bed, and Auntie Rose had her bedroom. After a few months, Mom and I found an apartment in the same complex where Auntie Rose lived—literally across the street.

It was a time of celebration for Mom. For the first time she was free. Truly free. She didn't have to deal with Dad anymore, even though she constantly worried about Richard. But because she filed for divorce, and Dad was the legal guardian at the time, Mom had no say in Richard's future.

For the first month or so, this "new normal" seemed fine. I began second grade (I had not been able to finish the first grade because of the chaos at home during most of the school year). I couldn't go back to a private school as it was too expensive for Mom, and so I had to attend a local public school.

I missed my Daddy so much. I began writing him letters. At times he would respond and other times he would keep quiet.

Mrs. Campbell, my second-grade teacher, would call me over to her desk during snack time and share her goldfish with me. My Mom didn't want me to have snacks. She said that I was a fat girl and didn't need any snacks. But Mrs. Campbell would call me over and we would eat together. It was the Eucharist for me and I loved this moment.

Things began to be steady, but then took an awful turn at the end of the first school semester of the second grade. It was parent/teacher conference and Mom came in to meet with Mrs. Campbell one of the nights about my grades.

"Ms. Mugisha, Kije is such a bright kid. She actually did pretty good! She doesn't seem to have a problem in any area aside from daydreaming!" Mom looked at the report card Mrs. Campbell handed to her; she opened it up and gave me the look of death! "Straight B's, Kije! No A's! Not even one A? What's wrong with you? Are you stupid? What happened?"

Mrs. Campbell looked confused as Mom began to beat me. Mrs. Campbell pulled us apart and talked to Mom away from me. Minutes later the Principal and another teacher came to the classroom. I think they were confused, too, as they saw a competent and smart parent beating up on her child for getting what seemed to be not bad grades at all.

Do any of you know what it feels like to never be good enough? It took me almost two decades before I confronted my Mom in 1999 about the physical and verbal abuse she put me through. We talked face to face one night for nearly six hours until morning.

"Mom said to me, "Kije, I'm so sorry. I loved you so much, and I always knew you were smart enough—but so is your Dad—and I didn't want you to turn out like him. I'm sorry, Kije. I'm sorry."

I didn't know how powerful those two words would be to me. As Mom apologized I began to close a chapter of my wounded childhood.

Today, as an adult, I understand that Mom's pain wasn't at all about me but rather was her fear of my "not becoming." That fear transformed into years and years of physical abuse. Beatings that were primarily done in our sitting room closet where no one would hear me scream. I was forsaken yet a second time.

During this momentous conversation I had with Mom over 17 years later, I shared with her that in the summer of 1984, I tried to take my own life. I figured with the reasoning capacity of a nine-year-old girl whose Daddy was absent by choice and whose Mommy beat her to the point where my whole body was covered with welts. I made up my mind that my life just wasn't worth it. I came into a world with parents who didn't seem to like me. They don't love me. They don't kiss me or hug me. I was sad and cried silently when I left home. I believe that is when God began responding to me by saying, "You, Kije, are *my* daughter. I love you. You are *my* child. I will be with you. Don't cry."

That summer in 1984 was a turning point for me. It also happened to be the same year that I spent two amazing weeks at my uncle's home right here in the New York City metro area. We call him 'DUG' which stands for Dad. Uncle. Grandpa. These are all the roles, the "hats," he wears every day.

I went to spend two weeks with DUG and his family, and it was great. I wasn't as talkative and loud as my two younger cousins. They have calmed down since then (smile). I was quite reclusive and did my best to fit in and do what I was told so that Mom would get a good report when I was dropped off after my visit.

It is during the events of life's journey that many times one can question the purpose of one's own existence and ask questions all along the way. I do believe in Angels. Yes, I believe in Angels. DUG is my earth angel. All through my childhood growing up—and particularly after the divorce—DUG's presence was the reminder that I needed to know that indeed I'm a child of God. I would watch and observe everything he did on every visit and every encounter. I would often keep very quiet so I could listen to everything he said to me and log it in my memory.

Over all these years it began to click that this is what love looks like in the face of suffering. My childhood wasn't good. It was scary. And the worst part is that Dad wasn't there.

But I thank my God almighty for the love of Christ. Dad wasn't there but DUG was, and still is.

Amen.

ST BART'S

A Meditation by

Mr. Patrick Bergquist, *Director of Children, Youth and Family Ministries*

The Fifth Meditation: "I am thirsty."

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, March 25, 2016
Good Friday, Based on John 19:25b-28*

"Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" These are the words of Jesus spoken to Peter, just as Peter has struck the high priest's slave, Malchus. The guards, led by Judas, had been dispatched to the garden. They bore lanterns and torches and weapons. Jesus approaches the men and says that he is the one they are looking for. At the words of Jesus, the guards fall to the ground—stunned. Once again, Jesus announces who he is, and offers himself to them. Jesus knows what is happening and where he is going. It is at this point that fervor or fear or adrenalin captures Peter, and he strikes Malchus. Peter, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

Throughout the Gospel story of John we find immersive language and stories of water. Jesus is baptized in the river Jordan by John. His first miracle shows him turning plain water into extraordinary wine for a great feast. In the burning midday sun he speaks to the Samaritan woman and says that he is offering water that will be like a spring, gushing up to eternal life. The woman, who has been cast out, finds that there is a new, eternal source of water. Her parched soul tastes this water and is captured by it.

We find Jesus walking on water and healing the man who has been near the pool of Siloam waiting for someone to help him into the waters when they were stirred. At the Celebration of the booths, Jesus once again preaches boldly about a new kind of water. He says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

In this most holy of weeks, we celebrated Jesus stooping down with a basin and towel to wash his disciples' feet. For Jesus, water has been transformed; it is transforming all it touches and it is plentiful.

But now, we sit at the foot of this cross. In our passage we hear him speak to his mother saying, "Mother, here is your son." And he turns to his beloved disciple and says, "Son, here is your mother." In the agony of the cross, as the hour of his death draws closer, he looks to these two in love and compassion.

We sit here and we gaze upon our crucified savior, our naked and vulnerable God. The fullness of his humanity is revealed in these next words, "I am thirsty." His body has been overwhelmed by the torturers of this day. His lips are cracked and his voice is weak. He looks out and sees only a few of his followers; the rest are in hiding. The crowd that was cheering him on Palm Sunday is now calling for his death. The guards at his feet are casting lots for his clothes. He is suffering. He is dying.

This story of Jesus shows us a man who is both fully God and is fully human. He is not one who only half way knows what it is like to walk among us, but he is one who fully knows. The prologue to John says that this God/man pitched his tent with us. He chose to live fully with us. He chose to fully die with us as well.

The cup that he spoke to Peter about was not a cup filled with life-giving water that He spoke of throughout the Gospel. It was a cup of suffering and pain. It was a cup of profound sacrificial love. It was a cup of death.

Jesus understood what suffering looked like. More so, he understood what suffering felt like. He knew the pangs of hunger and the pains of torture. He knew what it meant to feel deeply alone and to feel abandoned by those he loved. As the moments of his death drew near, our crucified savior calls out, "I am thirsty."

On this Good Friday, we not only hear the call of Jesus from the cross, we hear the call of so many people throughout the

world. They cry out, "I am thirsty." They call out from their estrangement. They call out from their pain. They call out from their suffering.

- We hear the Syrian refugee's call out, "I am thirsty," as they seek shelter in a chaotic world.
- We hear the people of Belgium and those around the world call out, "I am thirsty," as they grapple with terrorism.
- We hear those trapped in addiction and those who love them, call out, "I am thirsty," as they wrestle with their addiction.
- We hear the voices of children who are trapped in systems of oppression call out, "I am thirsty," as they try to break free from the chains that so often bind them.

We hear our own voice in the crowd crying out, "I am thirsty," as we struggle with the pain and bondage we all are in.

The power of this day, and the power of this cross, is that we are not left alone to cry out, "I am thirsty." Unlike Jesus, who was offered a mocking sponge full of spoiled wine, we are offered a life-giving swell of water that comes gushing from the empty tomb of Christ. We are given new life. We are given a new community. We are given a new mission.

ST BART'S

A Meditation by

The Rev. Elise Ashley Hanley, *Deacon*

The Seventh Meditation: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, March 25, 2016
Good Friday, Based on Luke 23:44–49*

“Behold the Lamb of God,
Bowed down in bitter pain;
To God his dying prayer ascends.
In death, my Lord and Savior, may **I** cry with you:
‘My father, I commend my spirit into your loving hands.’
I die in you.”¹

It has been commonly documented that when people are close to their death, they see their loved ones who have died before them. A friend of mine who cared for the dying at a geriatric center recalled that almost every one of her patients would call out for their mother or their father before they would die. Other stories have recounted how people who have seemed hopeless as they lay dying would suddenly change demeanor after seeing a loved one who had died before them, like a spouse or partner, a parent or a sibling. Suddenly, they would go from seeming hopeless about their impending death, to feeling hopeful about what lay ahead of them. They would regain a sense of joy and anticipation of being reunited with those they had loved and lost. Cynics will say that these are just visions brought on by science—by a lack of oxygen to the brain, or as side effects of morphine and other painkillers. I would prefer to think of them as signs of love, comfort, and guidance from a loving God in a time of great pain and fear. It therefore doesn't surprise me that in Jesus' dying moment, Jesus is calling for his father. In Jesus' dying moment, Jesus shows us hope.

Jesus is our teacher. In earlier parts of Luke's Gospel, Jesus teaches with authority. Jesus teaches us how to pray and how to relate to God his Father. He teaches us how to live our lives by example through parables like the Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son. He also teaches us how to live our lives through what we know as the Sermon on the Mount: We are to love our enemies, we are to do good to those who hate us, we are to bless those who curse us, and we must pray for those who oppress us. Jesus teaches us to live with humility. Jesus challenges us to show mercy, even if it means breaking down boundaries, welcoming the stranger, and protesting the works and rulings of the dominating Empire.

Jesus' teachings are what have helped bring him and us now to our current scene: Jesus has been condemned to death and crucified. Imagine that we are among the “crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle,” and we stand watching. Jesus,

¹ Dale Wood, “Behold the Lamb of God,” from *A Service of Darkness: Seven Choral Meditations on the Last Words of Christ Adapted From the Ancient Tenebrae* (Shawnee Press, 1962), 1.

from the cross, continues to teach us. Even as Jesus hangs in agony from the cross, in a moment of sheer bloody, public helplessness, he teaches us how to **live**. And now, at his final moment, with his dying breath, he teaches us how to **die**.

Jesus prays to God using the words of the psalmist: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” If you have ever prayed Compline, the order for night prayer in our Episcopal tradition, you will have prayed such words: “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.” It invokes the words of a common children’s prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” By these words of prayer we affirm our faith, that we are giving up control and giving ourselves completely to God.

Jesus teaches us how to do this by example. Jesus teaches us through both his life and death how to relate to God with love and trust. Even in this most horrific moment, Jesus trusts fully in God. Jesus affirms his trust in God as his loving parent and his refuge and his strength. Jesus teaches us that just as we have come from God, who breathed life into each of us, we live our lives to return to God upon our own final breath. Jesus is not commending his spirit to the unknown, or into a void, or to the grave. And nor should we—we are to entrust our spirits to God in faith, every day, and every night, not knowing if we will wake up again. Not knowing, in such a troubled and terror-filled world, if we will return home safely each day. Jesus teaches us to walk in faith, placing ourselves entirely in God’s loving hands.

The pain of Good Friday is that we must face death head on. We must face one especially unjust, profoundly painful death. We stand before the cross and we feel uncomfortable, angry, and sad because Jesus’ death is also all about us: if the Son of God must suffer and die, what on earth may happen to us? And what part does each of us play in the death of our Lord and Savior? What is frightening is that we are not in control of any of it, including our own lives. In faith, we must trust God. We must commend our spirits and our lives to God.

Jesus says that whoever wants to be his follower must deny themselves and take up their cross each day and follow him. As Christians, we are to give up our lives—spiritually, symbolically, and even physically, if necessary, following Jesus’ example. In this way, we live in Christ. On this Good Friday, it can be helpful to reflect on how we do so. Do we show commitment to Jesus’ teachings? Do we proclaim the Gospel by what we do and say? Do we live lives of humility and forgiveness? Do we pray? Do we work for justice and peace? Do we seek to serve Christ in everyone we meet, loving others as we love ourselves? Do we respect the dignity of every... single... human being? If we live our lives by faith, we live in Christ, and then we can die in Christ. We too may share in Jesus’ final cry of hope: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” By following Jesus, we can learn how to die.

As we stand at a distance from the cross, watching these things, may we continue to hear Jesus’ words of hope and confidence. May we find in Jesus’ words a firm foundation on which to stand when the world around us leaves us shaken. May we find hope for when we too face our own final moments, our own final breaths.

“Behold the Lamb of God.”

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