

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Various

"The Seven Last Words- a Blueprint for Life"

IN DEATH WE UNDERSTAND LIFE

***Ecclesiastes 7:1-2: "A good name is better than a good ointment,
And the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.
It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes it to heart."***

Palm Sunday is in all respects a paradox. Jesus is entering into Jerusalem in triumph. Crowds filled with great joy and anticipation of the celebration of the Passover have gathered in the city. Many are hailing Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah. Thus, there is also the anticipation of what Jesus will do. Only days earlier had He raised Lazarus from the tomb, and this incredible miracle had created such a commotion that the religious leaders were now actively conspiring to have Jesus killed.

We know what happens don't we? Jesus knew what was going to happen. He knew He was heading to His death. His disciples didn't know it, the people didn't know, even the religious leaders, while they were hoping He indeed would die (for after the raising of Lazarus they had conspired to have Jesus killed), weren't sure. But we know how it ended; and so on Palm Sunday we don't only have a reading concerning Jesus entering the city, but we also hear the Passion retold: His betrayal, His arrest, His suffering, His crucifixion - this year we heard it from Luke's Gospel.

EVEN IN DEATH, A BLUEPRINT FOR LIFE

Christ's death - one of the most profound events in human history, in all the universe. I mean think about it for a moment - we aren't confronted with man's evil and the problem of sin by His birth, but by His death. We don't see the full power of God's love in His birth but in His death. Sin is not paid for in His birth but by His death. And one cannot fully appreciate the power of the resurrection from His birth but from His death.

Thus, it shouldn't surprise us that while Christ is dying He gives us the blueprint for life. Even while He is suffering and the lifeblood of His body is leaving His body, He is still revealing the Father's will for our lives. Even in death He is giving us words of life.

And we find such wisdom in the words He utters from the cross - the Seven Last Words, seven sayings. Now we shouldn't lose sight of the number seven. Seven is the number of completion in the Bible. God made the universe and world in six days and then rested on the seventh. We find the number seven in John's Gospel with the seven *I AM* statements by Christ, the seven divine titles of Jesus and the seven signs/miracles of Jesus that described by John. We find the number seven throughout the Book of Revelation with the seven spirits, the seven churches, seven trumpets, the seven seals, the seven bowls and so forth. And I might add we can see how the New Testament is not only inspired by God but put together by the Holy Spirit. You know why? There are seven churches addressed by Paul in his letters - Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. And now seven last sayings out of four gospels. What are they and where are they found?

SEVEN SAYINGS IN FOUR GOSPELS

Matthew's and Mark's Gospels record the words that Jesus said to the Father, "***My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?***" (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). Jesus is not only conveying the weight of the world's sin and rejection He is feeling, but the abandonment of His Father, as well. He is also quoting **Psalm 22**, a Messianic Psalm that highlights the suffering the Messiah will go through.

In **Luke's Gospel** we have three sayings: "***Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.***" (Lk. 23:34)

Jesus' words to the thief who repented, "***Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise.***" (Lk. 23:43)

And before His actual death, the words Jesus prayed, "***Father, into Your hands, I commit My spirit.***" (Lk. 23:46)

In **John's Gospel**, we have three more sayings: Jesus looking down from the cross at His mother, Mary and the apostle John. He says to John, "***Woman, behold your son!***" and then to His disciple, "***Behold, your mother!***" (Jn. 19:26-27)

We are then told in **Jn. 19:28**, that after hanging on the cross for a lengthy period of time, Jesus said, "***I thirst,***" after which some standing by soaked a sponge in a jar of sour wine and after attaching it to a branch of hyssop give him a drink.

And then finally, before giving up His spirit, John records that Jesus says "***It is finished.***" (Jn.19:30)

Seven profound statements from the mouth of God, from the mouth of Jesus Christ.

If you study the four accounts, one can figure out the order in which they were said. The traditional order is as follows as well as the theme of each saying:

- 1) ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*** (forgiveness)
- 2) ***"Truly I say to you, today, you will be with me in paradise."*** (salvation)
- 3) ***Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother."*** (relationship)
- 4) ***"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"*** (abandonment)
- 5) ***"I thirst."*** (distress)
- 6) ***"It is finished."*** (triumph)
- 7) ***"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."*** (reunion)

"FATHER FORGIVE THEM..."

These seven give us a blueprint for life. Think about it for a moment. Why did Jesus come? To reveal God to us. To show us that God is holy and just but also that He is loving and compassionate. We are separated from God and need to be reconciled. And the only way we can be reconciled is for our sin to be paid for. Jesus does so and offers us forgiveness. There is no greater gift. Only God can forgive our sins. And so when Jesus prays ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*** Is there any greater way to show it? I mean Christ had been arrested, unfairly tried, beaten and whipped, and then chosen to be executed instead of a known murderer, Barabbas! Then on top of all this, He is led away to be killed by one of the most horrible deaths known to mankind, crucifixion. Many in the crowd ridicule Him, and say, "He saved others, why doesn't He save Himself." The soldiers mockingly call Him King as they divide His garments, and yet after going through all this, while on the cross, we are told Jesus says to His Father, prays

You know the Bible teaches that God loves us unconditionally. That we love because God first loved us. That God demonstrates His own love toward us in the while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Can there be any greater display of love than to forgive those who show such viciousness and evil? Jesus was opening up the door for forgiveness because many really didn't understand or know what they were doing. He wasn't going to write them off. He was going to give them another chance as long as they had breath.

I am reminded of Peter's question of Jesus while He walked with His disciples, ***"Lord if my brother sins against me, how many times should I forgive, 7 times?"*** Jesus said, ***I did not say seven time but up to 70x7."*** We are to always have forgiveness in our hearts because forgiveness is the step that paves the way to reconciliation.

Paul said God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are ambassadors of God's reconciling love. And this means, accepting our need for forgiveness from God. We are sinful and in need of a Savior

and being ready to forgive others who have wronged us. In **Jn. 15:9**, on the night before He died, Jesus said ***"Just as I love you, so you must also love one another."*** Incorporated in those words, one could also say, Just as I forgave you, you must also forgive one another.

Jesus came to set things right for us before Almighty God. He came to give us an example that we should follow. And as a result salvation is offered to all mankind.

"TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE"

We read in Luke that while Jesus was on the cross, one of the two criminals crucified next to Him, mocked Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" How ironic that the very thing the one criminal ridiculed Jesus about was the very thing Jesus was doing! By dying on the cross, Jesus was paving the way for the salvation of mankind. He didn't need to save Himself, either. He said in **Jn 10:18**, ***"No one takes it (my life) from me, I lay it down of My own accord."***

The other thief, however, rebukes his fellow criminal, and says ***"Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."*** And he was saying, ***"Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingdom!"*** Then Jesus said to him, ***"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."***

Notice that the thief called Jesus by His first name. The personal connection is obvious. And he simply asks Jesus to remember him when He comes in His Kingdom which is undoubtedly in the future. But Jesus says to the man, TODAY he will be in paradise. I believe that this is the Lord reassuring the man and all of us that upon our deaths when we are in the Lord we go to paradise immediately. Paradise is another term for heaven, but we are told in Revelation that there will be new heavens and a new earth. So I think the best way to understand it is a division of heaven where we go first before the consummation of the age after Christ returns. Paul uses the same language when he writes about being caught up into the third heaven (again the Greek word "paradise") in **2 Cor. 12:4**.

Unfortunately, there are those who mistranslate this verse and contend that the Greek should be translated "Truly I say to you today, you shall be with Me in Paradise." The Roman Catholics say this to justify the doctrine of purgatory, and then those who believe in soul sleep (the idea that our soul is inextricably linked to our physical bodies so that when our physical body dies we don't exist until the resurrection) argue the same point but for the opposite reason!

For me the key to understanding this verse correctly, is found in two areas. First, the criminal on the cross asks Jesus to remember him *WHEN* Jesus comes in His Kingdom. Timing is in view here. Jesus says in response, that *Today* He will be with Him in paradise. In other words, the man does not have to wait! Some may say, but how can that be. Jesus is in the tomb. Yes, His body was in the tomb, but not

His Spirit! Second, nowhere in the Bible do we find the words, "Today I say to you." Why? It is obvious that when one speaks it is in the present tense! Such a statement would be redundant. Jesus often says, "*Truly I say to you,*" but never "*Today I say to you.*"

As the Apostle Paul reminds us in **2 Cor. 5:8** that "*to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord.*"

"BEHOLD YOU SON, BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER"

Upon seeing His mother and one of His closest disciples, Jesus utters those endearing words. Some ask why does He not call Mary, "Mom?" The reason is her role as mother is over. I realize that our Roman Catholic friends believe that Mary should be exalted as the Blessed Mother of God, and while she should be remembered and she will be called blessed, nowhere in the Scripture is she elevated to special status, and no where does it suggest that she can bestow special blessings upon us.

On an immediate level, Jesus was making sure His earthly mother would be taken care of. It is interesting to note that other than Judas who committed suicide, the Apostle John was the only one of the twelve not martyred for the faith. He lived into his eighties during which time He received the visions recorded in the Book of Revelation.

But ultimately, Jesus was affirming was that in Him we all become family. John and Mary have a special spiritual relationship through Christ. It transcends natural bonds. The Church is the family of God. We are supposed to love each other as Christ loves us. We are to care for one another, pray for one another, get to know one another, and work for the Kingdom together. That is why it is frustrating for me when people come to Church hit or miss, or keep their distance from the life of their church family. This is not being a true member in the family of God.

We are all related because of the cross, because of the blood of Christ. He has given us a new life through the forgiveness of our sins, He has given us eternal life, and He has given us a new and eternal family. And even as Jesus died, He was telling the world that this is so!

"MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Here, is the incredible words of despair that Jesus utters when faced with the weight of the world's sin. These words were first proclaimed in **Psalm 22**. **Psalm 22** is considered a messianic psalm that foretells the suffering of Jesus. Most scholars say that one cannot fully understand the depth of anguish that Jesus must have faced in light of bearing the weight of the worlds' evil and sin. It was so intense that He for a moment felt separated from His Father - a real sense that the Father was not there. Of course, His Father was and is always there. As **Psalm 139:7** says, "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*"

Scott and Janet Willis, part-time pastor in Chicago, 9 children, Peter had just been born, three were old enough to they knew the Lord. One weekend they had decided to visit just to the west of Milwaukee and all of a sudden pierced the gasoline tank and The freak accident occurred about 10:30 a.m. on Nov. 8, 1994, when the family was traveling to Wisconsin to celebrate birthdays. The van, driven by Scott Willis and carrying his wife and six of their nine children, struck a piece of debris that had fallen off a truck driven by Ricardo Guzman. The debris, a mudflap/taillight assembly, punctured the mini-van's gas tank, and the car burst into flames.

What this means for us. Evil and sin are real and they are spiritual problems. As a result of living in a fallen world, there will be times in our lives that we feel God is not there, or that we have been abandoned by God. It isn't the case but we will feel that way. This may be the result of intentional sin, spiritual apathy, or just plain trying circumstances that have nothing to do with our unfaithfulness or sin. In other words, there will be times when we will be walking with the Lord, but the trials of life will be overwhelming. One of the great truths of Scripture, of life is that God became man, He became flesh, Jesus. He felt everything we feel. If the Son felt abandonment, do you not think you will, too? It is part of our spiritual journey.

"I THIRST"

And then following up on that saying, we hear the words, "*I thirst.*" We go from a feeling of abandonment to one of distress. Do you remember the Samaritan woman at the well? She came to get water, but Jesus said, I will give you water that will never make your thirst again. He was talking about spiritual water. The Holy Spirit. God can only satisfy the inmost desires of our heart.

But as long as we are in the flesh, we will still battle with the desires of the flesh and the shortcomings of the flesh. So too, Jesus. In humbling himself, He took upon himself flesh. He was susceptible to the same shortcomings that we face even though He is the source of living water.

Jesus was vulnerable, He was in need. The master, the king, the Lord of life, thirsty.

It only stands to reason that he would utter such words of despair after he felt abandoned by the Father. There is a lesson here. Without God, we have nothing, we are nothing. Without Him, there is no hope, no purpose, no meaning, no life.

But as soon as we see Jesus gripped by such feelings of abandonment and distress, Jesus says **words of triumph.**

"IT IS FINISHED"

We read in **Hebrews 12:2**, *"that for fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"*. In other words, Jesus endured because He knew in the end it would be worth it. Life would conquer death. Listen to these words also from **Hebrews 2:14-15**: *Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.*

But this is all because of Christ's death. You have heard me say recently that the Cross says, "Done, done, done." There is nothing more, nothing less needed for salvation. The world's religions, on the other hand, say, "Do, do, do."

It is why there is no other way of salvation. If Jesus' death is not sufficient, then it was unnecessary. And if it was unnecessary, then why did He even endure it?

FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS, I COMMIT MY SPIRIT"

Finally, we come to the last words of Jesus. In **Luke 23:46**, we are told that Jesus said, *"Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit."* Here we have words of reunion. They are also found in Psalm 31:5 and used by Jews as an evening prayer.

When all is said and done, Jesus goes back to His Father. He came from the Father and now He returns to the Father. In **Jn. 14:2**, Jesus said on the night before He died, *"I go to prepare a place for you that where I am, there you may be also."* Jesus came to restore our relationship with God.

But it is also meant to tell us that not only do we have destiny to be with God forever, we have a destiny here on earth and the only way we truly fulfill our destiny is to place our life - our plans, our desires, our aspirations and hopes into His hands. There is no other way. We can choose other ways, but it will not work out in the end.

So we see that even on the cross, Jesus was showing us the way of life. He was telling the world, that Yes, we are sinners in need of a Savior. Yes, there is Savior who Saves! Yes, there is a God who wants to be in relationship with His people, yes there will be times even in a faithful walk where we will feel God is not there, there will be hardship, but do not fret or fear, God will give us the victory, for we have a place waiting for us and our duty is to commit ourselves to God until that time. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!