

Word of Committal

In the name of our King who was lifted up for us, dear friends in Christ: This evening we come to the end of the journey we started together some six weeks ago on Ash Wednesday when we began this series of Lenten meditations on the last seven words of Christ spoken from the cross. In a broader sense, we've come to the end of the larger journey we take each year that begins in the weeks before Christmas with the season of Advent. It's then that we think about our need for a Savior sent from heaven. In a spiritual sense we join the Old Testament saints in hopeful expectation looking forward to the promises of God being fulfilled. Our prayers are answered (in part) when we celebrate the nativity of our Lord and his coming into the world in human flesh. And then in the weeks that follow, we walk with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry as he begins to reveal himself and the sublime truths of God. We see him healing people, working great signs and wonders, and teaching in synagogues and the countryside alike. Huge crowds come flocking to him.

And then when things really start looking up for the ministry of Jesus, there's a sudden dark turn: he sets his face toward Jerusalem where he intends to fulfill his mission by laying down his life. We see him face rising opposition, especially from the religious authorities; but that does not deter or discourage him. Instead he boldly marches forward, right into the enemy's stronghold—as we saw this last Sunday when we heard how the crowd hailed him as their King and cried out to him, “Hosanna! Save us! Save us right now, Son of David!” Not coincidentally, he came into the city of Jerusalem on the same day that the Passover lambs were brought in and taken to the Temple stockyard to await sacrifice.

On the eve of the Passover, he ate with his disciples the ceremonial meal by which the people relived the greatest act of deliverance in the Old Testament; they remembered how God saved his people by the death of the firstborn and the blood of the lamb. During that meal, he instituted the New Testament sacrament by which we experience the divine act of deliverance that the old ceremony had only pointed to. After supper, his journey led to the Mount of Olives where he prayed while he awaited his arrest. Then after four trials and immeasurable abuse, he staggered through the last few hundred yards of his bitter course to Golgotha, the place of crucifixion

There at journey's end, as he has been pouring out his life-blood for us, we have listened intently to his powerful last words. He began with a prayer to his Father to forgive those who were causing his death—and that would include you and me, for surely, we are just as responsible as those who were present. We heard him speak words of absolute assurance to a dying sinner who had come to repentance. And we understood that he spoke that message to us as well. We saw him ensure the safety and well being of his mother, and we noted that he was at the same time ensuring the well being of his church, which is the mother of us all.

And then we heard him die—and by that, I mean we heard him shout out the dreadful cry of spiritual death. We heard him lost, cut off from the love of God, and experiencing the unrelenting punishment of the damned. And perhaps, in some small way, we gained a deeper understanding of what it means to say, “Jesus died for the sins of the world”—indeed, what it means to say, “Jesus died for me”. Then, the very life drained out of him, we heard him thirsting for some tiny bit of relief—and we saw how even that small request for mercy was answered with more cruelty and spite. And then last week, we heard him shout out in

victory that all had been accomplished to ensure our salvation. His mighty work of atonement had been completed. And now, finally, even as he had begun with a prayer to his Father, he concludes his passion with a prayer: *“Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.”*

It is a remarkable prayer of faith and confidence. And the reason it is so remarkable is that at this point our Lord Jesus has had no sign or indication of his Father’s favor. He has not yet been granted even the slightest relief. Think about it: as the bearer of our sin he has been experiencing the righteous hatred of his Father. He is in agony, both physically because of the horrors of the cross and spiritually because his soul is being damned. His pleas for an answer, “why?” have been met with nothing but stony silence from above and the mocking of the crowd from below. His request for mercy was denied. He’s only been receiving increasingly higher wave after wave of his Father’s fury. Because of our sin, he is his Father’s enemy even now. And yet it is to his Father that he clings in hope and unshakable faith. He has the absolute certainty that the One who is punishing him so severely will also receive him graciously.

How is it possible for him to believe this *even now* when every present indication is that he is lost and abandoned? The answer is that he is not looking at the present circumstances. He is looking instead at the Word and character of God. He knows that his Father cannot lie. He knows that God cannot break his Word or fail to keep his promises. And he remembers the promises his Father has made in his Word. We read just a few of them earlier. In the Psalm we read, *“In my alarm I said, ‘I am cut off from your sight!’ And you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help. ... The Lord preserves the faithful.”* Or again, in the passage from Isaiah, *“It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his descendants and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hands. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.”*

Listen: it’s vital to understand that Jesus is not here drawing on some divine power he has because he is God the Son to see the end and happy conclusion to his suffering. In his state of humiliation, he has emptied himself and has become like *us*, choosing not to use his divine powers. Though everything he is experiencing tells him that he is cut off from God and damned, as indeed he is at this moment, he trusts in God’s Word to see him through this and bring him to the promised end. That is what makes it possible for him to commend his life and Spirit into his Father’s hands. The circumstances, as horrific as they are, do not matter to him. The only thing that matters is the Word of God that cannot be broken.

And that’s important to you and me because sometimes the circumstances we experience seem to tell us that God has abandoned us. There are times when heaven seems silent to our cries for help—or it seems that God only answers us with more problems and pain to endure. What these last Words of Jesus say to us is that when we bear life’s worst crosses, we can stand firmly on two important truths. First, that because Christ was punished for our sins, we never will be. Because God abandoned him, he will *never* abandon us. Because Jesus died spiritually, we never will truly die. The sting of death is gone. And because of all this, secondly, no matter how bad life gets, we know that since God cannot intend to harm us, he must be working for our good. No hardship, trial, deprivation, or pain can change that truth. The present circumstances really do not matter. The only things that matter are the promises of God that cannot and will not be broken. Like Jesus, that’s what we can and must hold on to.

In my relatively short ministry, I have been privileged a number of times to be present when a faithful child of God has made the passage from this life to the next. On some of those occasions I have witnessed a good deal of pain and suffering, experienced both by the one whose earthly life was ending, and also by that person's loved ones as they watched and waited helplessly. There is no question that it is life's most difficult and dark time—especially when it extends for days and weeks. And yet, I have also seen the perfect peace and confidence that prevails as those involved have commended the situation into the Lord's loving hands. No fear, no panic, no desperation ... yes, a very painful loss when it comes ... but one softened by seeing the person make the passage to life in peace and confidence, and by the certainty that the person was received into the arms of the Lord.

What I would have you take home with you this evening, is that Jesus' last Words of committal into the hands of the Father can also be our words. And though they are important for us when we make the passage from this life to the next, they really are not so much about dying as they are about *living*. It was to give us *life* that Christ laid down his own. We live this life right now: every day we can commend ourselves, body and spirit, into the hands of the Lord. The perfect peace he gives need not be reserved for the hour of death, but can be experienced always as we learn to rely more and more on the promises of God. It happens as we continue to focus on the words of Jesus: the seven words from the cross, sure, but beyond that, all the words that Jesus gives us in the pages of Holy Scripture. Through these words he gives us the Holy Spirit who creates and strengthens our faith so that we can live and die knowing that whatever happens, whatever hardships we endure, they are meant for our good and they must one day come to an end. And on that day, we will be awarded with the crown of righteousness, which the Lord himself will place upon our heads. God has promised this to us in Christ Jesus, and his Word cannot be broken.

And so we conclude with prayer, as did our Lord: To you, O Lord, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, in life, in death, and in all things we wholly commend ourselves.

*May your life and death supply
Grace to live and grace to die,
Grace to reach the home on high.
Hear us, holy Jesus. Amen.*

Soli Deo Gloria!