

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Text from the book: "Life of Christ" by Bishop Fulton Sheen

THE FIRST WORD

Father forgive them; They do not know what it is they are doing
(Luke 22:34).

Men on dying either proclaim their own innocence, or condemn the judges who sentenced them to death, or else ask pardon for sins. But Perfect Innocence asked no pardon; as Mediator between God and man He extended pardon. As High Priest Who offered Himself in sacrifice, He pleaded for sinners. In a certain sense, the words of forgiveness were spoken twice: once in Eden, as God promised Redemption through the "seed of the woman" who would crush the serpent of evil; now as God in the form of the Suffering Servant who fulfilled the promise. So great was the Divine Love manifested in this First Word from the Cross that echoes were caught of it through history, such as Stephen asking that the Lord lay not to their charge the sin of those who stoned him; and Paul who wrote: "*I was deserted by everybody; May it be forgiven them*" (II Timothy 4:16).

But the prayers of Stephen and Paul were not like His, in which forgiveness was identified with His sacrifice. Being Himself both Priest and Victim, He was upright as a Priest, prostrate as a Victim. Thus He interceded and offered Himself for the guilty. Abel's blood clamored for the wrath of God to avenge the murder of Cain; the new Abel's Blood spilled by jealous brethren of the race of Cain was raised to lift the wrath and to plead for pardon.

THE SECOND WORD

The two thieves crucified on either side of Him at first blasphemed and cursed. Suffering does not necessarily make men better; it can sear and burn the soul, unless men are purified by seeing its redemptive value. Unspiritualized suffering may cause men to degenerate. The thief at the left was certainly no better because of pain. The thief on the left asked to be taken down. But the thief on the right, evidently moved by Our Savior's priestly prayer of intercession, asked to be taken up. Reprimanding his brother thief for his blasphemy, he said: "*What, hast thou no fear of God, when thou art undergoing the same sentence? And we*

justly enough; we receive no more than the due reward of our deeds; But this Man has done nothing amiss" (Luke 23: 40, 41). Then throwing himself upon Divine mercy, he asked for forgiveness: "*Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom*" (Luke 23:42). – Then the thief heard the immediate answer:

I promise thee, this day thou shalt be With Me in Paradise
(Luke 23:43).

It was the thief's last prayer, perhaps even his first. He knocked once, sought once, asked once, dared everything, and found everything. When even the disciples were doubting and only one was present at the Cross, the thief owned and acknowledged Jesus as Savior. If Barabbas came to the execution, how he must have wished that he never had been released, and that he could have heard the words of the compassionate High Priest. Practically everything about the Body of Christ was fastened by nails, or tortured by whips and thorns, except His Heart and His tongue – and these declared forgiveness that very day. But who can forgive sins, but God? And who can promise Paradise except Him Who by nature is eternal to Paradise?

THE THIRD WORD

Jesus said to his mother: "Woman, this is thy son". Then He said to the disciple: "This is thy mother" (John 19:26-27).

There were two great periods in the relations of Jesus and Mary, the first extending from the Crib to the marriage feast of Cana, and the second, from Cana to the Cross. In the first, she was the mother of Jesus; in the second, she began to be the mother of all whom Jesus redeemed. From Bethlehem to Cana, Mary had Jesus, as a mother has a son; she ever called Him familiarly "Son," at the age of twelve, as if that were her usual mode of address. But from Cana on, there is a growing detachment. A year after Cana she followed Him in His preaching. It was announced to Our Lord that His mother was seeking Him. Our Lord with seeming unconcern, turned to the crowd and asked: "*Who is a mother to Me?*" (Matthew 12:48). Then revealing the great Christian mystery that relationship is not dependent on flesh and blood, but on union with Divine nature through grace, He added: "*If anyone does the will of My Father, Who is in heaven, He is My brother, and sister, and mother*" (Matthew 12:50).

The mystery came to an end on Calvary. There she became our mother the moment she lost her Divine Son. It was a new love, or perhaps the same love expanded over the wider area of humanity. But it was not without its sorrow. It cost Mary something to have men as sons. She could give birth to Jesus in joy in a stable, but she could give birth to Christians only on Calvary, and in labors great enough to make Her Queen of Martyrs. The *Fiat* (latin word that means “Let this happen [to me]”) she pronounced when she became the Mother of God now became another *Fiat*, like unto Creation in the immensity of what she brought forth. It was also a *Fiat* which so enlarged her affections as to increase her pains. The bitterness of Eve’s curse – that woman would bring forth children in sorrow – was now fulfilled, and not by the opening of a womb but by the piercing of a heart, as Simeon had foretold. Mary became the mother of men, not by metaphor, or figure of speech but by pangs of birth.

THE FOURTH WORD

My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? (Matthew 27:46)

The signal feature in the sufferings of Our Lord was His desolation and solitude. The Divine Son called His Father “My God” – in contrast to the prayer which taught men to say “*Our Father Who art in heaven.*” It was not that His human nature was separated from His Divine nature; that was impossible. It was rather that just as the sun’s light and heat can be hidden at the base of a mountain by intervening clouds, though the peak is bathed in sunlight, so too, in taking upon Himself the sins of the world He willed a kind of withdrawal of His Father’s face and all Divine consolation. Sin has physical effects, and these He bore by having His hands and feet pierced; sin has mental effects which He poured forth in the Garden of Gethsemane; sin also has spiritual effects such as a sense of abandonment, separation from God, loneliness. This particular moment He willed to take upon Himself that principal effect of sin which was abandonment.

Man rejected God; so now He willed to feel that rejection. Man tinted away from God; now He, Who was God united personally with a human nature, willed to feel in that human nature that awful wrench as if He Himself were guilty. Earth had already abandoned Him by lifting His Cross above it; heaven had already abandoned Him by veiling itself in darkness; and yet

suspended between both, He united both. In that cry were all the sentiments in human hearts expressive of a Divine nostalgia: the loneliness of the atheist, the skeptic, the pessimist, the sinners who hate themselves for hating virtue, and of all those who have no love above the flesh; for to be without love is hell. It was therefore, the moment when leaning on nails He stood at the brink of hell in the name of all sinners. As He entered upon the extreme penalty of sin, which is separation from God, it was fitting that His eyes be filled with darkness and His soul with loneliness.

THE FIFTH WORD

When He was crucified, He refused to take a concoction which was offered Him; now He avidly asked for a drink. But there was considerable difference between the two drinks; the first was myrrh and was a stupefying potion to ward off pain; that He refused, in order that His senses might not be dulled. The drink that was now given to Him was vinegar or the sour bad wine of the soldiers. “*There was a jar there full of vinegar; so they filled a sponge with the vinegar and put it on a stick of hyssop, and brought it close to His mouth. Jesus drank the vinegar*” (John 19:29).

He Who had turned water into wine at Cana could have used the same infinite resources to have satisfied His own thirst, except for the fact that He never worked a miracle in His own behalf. But why did He ask for a drink? It was not solely because of the need, great though that must have been. The real reason for the request was the fulfillment of the prophecies: And now Jesus knew well that all was achieved which the scripture demanded for its accomplishment; and He said:

“I am, thirsty” (John 19:28).

The bystanders at the Cross who knew well the Old Testament prophecies were thus given another proof that He was the suffering Messiah. His fourth word, which expressed His sufferings of Soul, and His fifth word, which expressed sufferings of Body, were both foretold, Thirst was the symbol of the unsatisfying character of sin; the pleasures of the flesh purchased at the cost of joy of the spirit are like drinking salt water. The rich man in hell, in the parable, thirsted and begged Father Abraham to ask Lazarus to wet his tongue with but a drop of water. Making complete atonement for sin demanded that the Redeemer now feel

the thirst even of the lost before they are lost. But for the saved, too, it was a thirst – a yearning for souls. Some men have a passion for money, others for fame; His passion was for souls! “Give Me to drink” meant “give Me thy heart.”

THE SIXTH WORD

It is achieved (John 19:30).

Three times God used that same word in history: first, in Genesis, to describe the achievement or completion of creation; second, in the Apocalypse, when all creation would be done away with and a new heaven and earth would be made. Between these two extremes of the beginning and the accomplished end, there was the link of the sixth utterance from the Cross. Our Divine Lord in the state of His greatest humiliation, seeing all prophecies fulfilled, all foreshadowings realized, and all things done which were needful for the Redemption of man, uttered a cry of joy:

“It is achieved.”

The life of the Spirit could now begin the work of sanctification, for the work of Redemption was completed. In creation, on the seventh day, after the heavens and the earth were finished, God rested from all the work that He had done; now the Savior on the Cross having taught as Teacher, governed as King, and sanctified as Priest, could enter into His rest. There would be no second Savior; no new way of salvation; no other name under heaven by which men might be saved. Man had been bought and paid for. A new David arose to slay the Goliath of evil not with five stones but with five wounds – hideous scars on hands, feet, and side; and the battle was fought not with armor glistening under a noonday sun, but with flesh torn away so the bones could be numbered. The Artist had put the last touch on his masterpiece, and with the joy of the strong He uttered the song of triumph that His work was completed.

THE SEVENTH WORD

Father, into Thy Hands I commend My spirit (Luke 23:46).

These words were not spoken in an exhausted whisper, as men do as they breathe their last. He had already said that no one would take away His life from Him but that He would lay it down of Himself. Death did not lay its hand on His shoulder and give Him a summons to depart; He went out to meet death. In order to show that He would not die from exhaustion, but by an act of will, His last words were spoken: *Crying with a loud voice*. (Matthew 27:50) It is the only instance in history of a Dying One Who was a Living One, His words of departure were a quotation from the Psalms of David: “*Into thy hands I commend My Spirit; Thou, God ever faithful, wilt claim Me for Thyself. Let fools provoke Thee by the worship of false gods, for Me, no refuge but the Lord. I will triumph and exult in Thy mercy; it was Thou didst pity my weakness, and save Me when I was hard bested*” (Psalm 30:6-9).

It is difficult for man, who thinks of dying as the most terrible crisis in his life, to understand the joy that inspired these words of the dying Christ. Man thinks that it is his dying that decides his future state; it is rather his living that does that. Some of the choices he has made, the opportunities that were in his hand, the graces that he accepted or threw away are what decide his future. The peril of living is greater than the peril of dying. So now it was the way He lived, namely, to ransom men, that determined the joy of His dying and His union with the Heavenly Father. As some planets only after a long period of time complete their orbits, as if to salute Him Who sent them on their way, so the Word Incarnate, having completed its earthly mission, now returned again to the Heavenly Father Who sent Him on the work of Redemption.