

THE LAST SEVEN WORDS

INTRODUCTION

Today the crucifix is so common that its real meaning may be lost. The new crucifix you hang on the wall may be greeted with exclamations of: “Isn’t it pretty?” – Really the representation of Christ crucified is not supposed to draw forth such sentiments. It should turn your mind to the raw and violent, but also sublime and holy reality of Good Friday. The most lovable Man who ever walked the earth fell victim to the relentless hate of bitter enemies. They shoved aside truth, smothered everything good in themselves, demanded and obtained sentence of death from a weak judge. Hate triumphed: love was nailed to the cross. The wicked won their day and gloated and mocked. The all-holy Son of God suffered and died.

When you think of all this, your mind comes to grapple with the ultimate mysteries of free will, suffering, sorrow and sin. You stand on Calvary and view the world, the world within you, the world without. This is the only vantage point where vision is complete and undistorted.

THE FIRST WORD

Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing
(Lk. 23:34)

The enemies of Christ had plotted for some time. At least two months before, they had decided that He must die. Pontius Pilate, the Roman judge, took a basin to wash his hands of the guilt, declaring he could find no cause for condemnation. Any jury in the world would declare that the murder of Christ was premeditated in the fullest sense.

Yet the Victim before He succumbed, prayed that His enemies might be forgiven, for they knew not what they were doing. He prayed for all, not just the soldiers who were the tools of the execution. Such a prayer, by a man standing as yet uninjured before a firing squad, would show the deepest love of God and man. Such a prayer by a man already beaten with scourges, nailed to and hanging in extreme pain on a cross, shows an unmeasurable depth of love and forgetfulness of self.

There is only one conclusion to draw. Christ the great teacher wanted to show us that there is no possible case in which we are

justified in withholding forgiveness. There is never a time when we have the right to say: “They knew what they were doing to me. I cannot forgive.” Judgment must be left to God. Our duty is forgiveness. Only when the heart is emptied of human bitterness it can be filled with divine grace. – Thus we want to forgive all, especially those who may have hurt us in the past.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

THE SECOND WORD

Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in paradise
(Lk. 23:43)

The thief on the right of Christ had just asked: “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” With time running out, the laughter of life gone, stretched in cruel pain, paying his debt to society, this man humbly asks remembrance. Faith and repentance went with this simple request. Christ forgives his debt to God and assures him salvation that very day. The merciful God is always ready to forgive the sinner, no matter how great his sins or how long repentance has been delayed. It may be late, but it is never too late. The gates of heaven will always swing open, if the sinner humbly knocks. “As I live, saith the Lord God, I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way, and live.” (Ezech. 33:11). “There will be joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Lk. 15:10).

But the sinner must reach for the hand held out to save him. Like the good thief he must at least say: Remember me. The loving Savior, dying to save men, said nothing to the thief on the left who blasphemed and ridiculed to the end. There must always be faith and repentance. Then the riches of God’s generosity, like a tidal wave held back, pour forth to sweep the sinner away from hell and into the haven of paradise. – Thus we want to ask God’s mercy for all sinners who are to die.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

THE THIRD WORD

When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom He loved, he said to his mother, “*Woman, behold, thy son.*” Then He said to the disciple, “*Behold, thy mother.*” (Jn. 19:26,27)

His body shot through with darting agony, His soul struggling with the weight of all the sins and sorrows of mankind, Christ still thinks about His mother. He provides for her future not with a legacy, for He had no personal possessions, but by placing her in the care of a trusted friend. After all the proofs already given: the shedding of tears, affection for children, regard for the poor, the sick and crippled, sympathy for a widow who had lost an only son, Christ gives one more proof of His love, more touching than any. He gives His beloved mother to His disciple and so to all mankind. Under the cross the Blessed Virgin Mary becomes the Mother of the Church.

Christ giving His life for our redemption remembers the woman who had given Him birth, nursed Him, taught Him, shared His life as no other had. The great Heart that now labored in the stress of near-death, that loved all mankind, yet had the most tender spot for Mary, His mother. – Let us then pray for peace in families, your own and others; pray for more mothers worthy of the name.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

THE FOURTH WORD

But about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying: "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani,*" that is, "*My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Mt. 27:46).

Darkness spread over the earth while Christ was on the cross. It was a mysterious darkness. Deeper and more mysterious was the darkness within the soul of the Sufferer. Since He was God He could not really be forsaken by God. But the lonely humanity on the cross felt an utter abandonment.

There is no depth of suffering, bodily or mental that Christ did not undergo. He took on Himself the burden of sin; in doing that He also took on Himself every pain which is the result of sin. Nobody can ever say: "Yes, Christ indeed suffered, but He was God; He always had strong inner support, not like me who feels cut off from divine help." No man ever felt more cut off and alone than the Man of Good Friday. That is why those words which seem so foreign to His lips sound forth as a great and plaintive cry. They echo so loudly that some on Calvary are startled. This cry, welling from the desolation of Christ's soul, startles us too. After we ponder over it we know we have found a Companion for our

loneliest sorrows. – Let us recommend to God those suffering from the heavy and often unnoticed burden of spiritual conflict, mental and emotional troubles.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

THE FIFTH WORD

After this Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said: "*I thirst*" (Jn. 19:28).

Thirst was one of the worst pains that went with crucifixion, because of fever and loss of blood. Christ was not complaining or looking for relief. At His arrival on Calvary Christ had even refused the usual drink which was offered as a light sedative. The words, "I thirst" were spoken shortly before death. Christ spoke them in fulfillment of a prophecy: "And in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink" (Ps. 68:22). When the soldier raised the sponge with vinegar, Christ merely wet His lips.

He thirsted above all for the souls of all men of all time. A few days before, He had wept over the city as He approached it. On the cross He shed no tears that we know of. Perhaps tears of pain did run down His cheeks. But He showed the inner tears of sorrow and yearning when He said, "I thirst." He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly (Jn. 10:10). He called Himself the Way the Truth and the Life (Jn. 14:6). But men turn from the Way, blind themselves to the Truth and so they will miss eternal life. For all these souls Christ thirsts. The greater our union with Christ in prayer and sacrifice, the more we can do to help others to reach heaven.

And now, let us beg earnestly for a real appreciation of Christ's love for souls. Especially let us seek to understand this love as shown in the living memorial of the Eucharist.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

THE SIXTH WORD

Therefore, when Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "*It is consummated!*" (Jn. 19:30)

This was Christ's declaration that He had accomplished His life's work. He did not mean to say only that He was about to die. He meant to say that He had finished everything given to Him to

do on earth. His mission was a success. He had fulfilled every prophecy, had done absolutely each task that was assigned to Him.

But how can a man in the prime of life, dying as a criminal, declare Himself a success? Perhaps our whole concept of success has to be revised. Our yardstick for measuring it is wealth, power, acclaim by others, comfort, and attainment of immediate goals in some chosen field of endeavor. Christ was dying poor, jeered, full of pain, misunderstood by His countrymen, deserted by His friends. The yardstick that Christ used was imply the will of His Father. He was obedient in all things, even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). The external signs of success would come later. He was not concerned with them. To be a success means for any of us, to be obedient to God's designs for us. God has a special plan for each of us. Our constant prayer must be: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Not my will but Thine be done.

Let us pray that God's will may be done in our lives. Let us think of the hard things we have to accept right now, and take it as coming from the hand of God.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

THE SEVENTH WORD

And Jesus cried out with a loud voice and said: "*Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.*" (Lk. 23:46)

The symphony of life is over. From the first infant cry in the poverty of the stable at Bethlehem to the last sound of the broken, naked poverty of the cross, it has played on. At the beginning the background notes are the song of angels chanting peace, and the neglect of mankind which failed to see its Savior. At the end the background again shows contrast: the strident sounds of exulting, mocking hate, and the chorus unheard on earth of angels proclaiming man's Redemption.

The last note of Christ Himself is one of contentment. The earth quakes, the veil of the temple is rent, there is clamor about Him, but for Christ the violence is over. His soul is at peace. The last tone of life's symphony is sweet and firm. This is the only way Christ as God-man could have died, showing He was the final conqueror, that He was in perfect harmony with His Father. After these words He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit.

Someday each one of us must die. Body and soul will separate. The soul will go to Christ for judgment. If we live in the shadow

of Christ's cross we will be able to commend our spirit finally with joy and confidence into His hands. – Let us pray for our own hour of death.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...

AFTER THE MEDITATION

We listened to Christ's Last Words. They are not idle. They are loaded with meaning. They give us a picture of His innermost soul during the hours of suffering on the Cross. They capsule for us the essence of His Sacred Heart, and in so doing, provide a ready-made plan for making our hearts like His own. Those Words take you inside the mind of Christ in the supreme moments of His life and of the history of mankind. They can change your life – if you listen in the right way. The way to do this is to go over and over those final Words until they are a part of us. – Let us pray to obtain this grace from God's bounty.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be...