

Last Words

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Matthew 27:45-46*

Some of you will remember that my mother, Loisjean, died last August. And some of you may remember that in a sermon a few weeks later I shared my mother's last, meaningful words to me. I won't retell that story here, but I gather that some of you could also share some memories of last words. Maybe those words were tender and heartfelt. Maybe they were sadly confused or troubling or unintelligible. Maybe something critical was resolved. Or maybe it was an unexpected moment of levity. In any case, those last words tend to stick with us.

Many of you will know of the seven last words of Jesus, the final words of his earthly life as he hung on the cross, dying. These seven last words are taken from all four gospels, and among these gospel accounts there is a surprising diversity in both narrative and tone. This is particularly so in the case of what we might call the last-last words of Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, for instance, Jesus is nearly magisterial. In the moment that precedes and introduces the last-last words of Jesus, we are told that "*Jesus knew that all was now finished.*" (19:28) Here the gospel writer is returning to the theme, with reference to Jesus, of *the hour* or *my hour*, a motif that has been carefully cultivated throughout the gospel and is now brought to fulfilment. "*Jesus knew that all was now finished.*" Knowing this, we can better understand and contemplate John's record of the last-last words of Jesus: "*It is finished,*" and "*Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*" (19:30)

In the Passion account from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus seems similarly composed, and arguably more energetic: "*Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.*"

The penultimate words of Jesus in Luke, not found in any other gospel, are also worth noting. An exchange arises between Jesus and the two prisoners crucified with him. The prisoner who begins the exchange is bitter, accusatory and desperate. But the last words of the other prisoner are this: "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" [To which Jesus replies], "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" (Luke 23:42-43) Here, Luke is also emphasizing a familiar theme, turning the tables on our expectations of who is in and who is out when it comes to the heart and compassion of God: a good Samaritan, a prodigal son, and now a criminal deserving death. Luke wants us to know that Jesus did not renege on his vision of God's extravagant mercy, even under the duress of his own suffering and imminent death.

The last-last words of Jesus that we heard today are from the Passion account in the Gospel of Matthew. There's little or no majesty here, as in John. There is no reassuring word to the criminal crucified with him, as in Luke. In Matthew's account, in fact, we are told that "*The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him.* (27:44)

This and so many other moments in Matthew's Passion account convey a sense that Jesus is utterly alone, cut off, isolated. His complete abandonment comes to full expression in his last-last word. "*Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?'* that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" Shortly thereafter, He "*cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.*" (27:45-46)

This last-last word from Matthew's gospel seems particularly timely and relevant for our world and for us at this time, as we reel from global health and economic traumas as well as from newly imposed and urgent social isolation.

Some good and faithful Christians I know are holding fast to their faith in a good and loving God who will surely show mercy and deliver us soon, perhaps by way of some conspicuously divine intervention. Indeed: "*Come quickly, Lord Jesus.*" (Revelation 22:20) Others I know imagine the present ordeal adds to the argument against any all-powerful and loving God. In both cases, individuals are eager to argue and defend a point of view. They want unassailable answers, certainty in the context of so much uncertainty.

Unsettling as it may be, I invite you to note with me that the last word of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is a question. "*My God, my God, why ... why have you forsaken me?*" The form alone of this last word suggests that, even for Christ in this moment, there is still more to be revealed. Jesus asks the question as he is hanging on the cross, and for the moment there is no answer. With regard to this question, we might say that he, and we also, are left hanging.

Although the question is left unanswered, it yields opportunities to make his question our own, if need be, and perhaps even to deepen and sustain our own faith. Notice, for instance, that even in the most profound conceivable anguish, Jesus does not doubt his God. His question begins, "My God, my God ..." These words imply the strongest possible identification of Jesus with his Father in heaven, the God of all creation. The continuing divine relationship is therefore at least implicit in the question and seems to be intact, despite the ordeal and uncertainty. I wonder if or when the same may be said of us in the context of our most vexing or painful questions, even those that remain unanswered.

As or more important here is the word forsaken. '*Why have you forsaken me?*' The meaning of the Greek here is no surprise. Jesus is expressing both the most intense and the most agonizing of human emotions, acute pain suffered all alone. This last word of Jesus was and is also Matthew's last word on the argument that Jesus our Lord was fully human, that he came to live and die as one of us. Whatever our own agonies or isolation or unanswered questions, therefore, you and I persevere in believing that our God, in Christ, has been, and remains, and will continue, with us.

I can't help but wonder now what my own last word or words will be, and to whom, and with what consequence or value. Or what about yours? Your last word or words.

For the time being, I wonder if the last word of Jesus as told by Matthew may be of value to us now. His last word, a question, cried in a loud voice, may give us courage to ask or even cry out our questions, to be forthright about our fear, our turmoil, our sense, however we may feel it, of being forsaken. Even in the absence of answers, we may be surprised to find ourselves entrusting all of it, as Christ did, to the heart and eternal care of 'My God, my God.' Amen.