

Good Friday – the 7 last words

There is a widespread belief that the last words somebody says before they die sum up the total experience of their life. It isn't always true, but when it is, they are often quoted as 'famous last words'.

Personally I like those attributed to Spike Milligan, 'I told you I was ill'.

According to the four Gospels, Jesus spoke several times when he was being crucified. Considering the pain involved it's amazing that he was able to speak at all. Adding the four gospels together, we have seven last words of Jesus; there may well have been more.

They are called the 'Seven Words from the Cross'; and each one tells us something about how we should live, and hope to die.

The first was spoken, according to Luke, while the soldiers were nailing Jesus to the cross. 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing', Jesus said. It was not only the soldiers, each one of us often does things which hurt Jesus. But he forgives us; bringing forgiveness was the purpose of his life and death.

To the penitent thief, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' Here was forgiveness at its most demanding; Jesus forgives someone who may have been a murderer, but who, at the last minute, showed a flash of faith. Jesus encouraged him.

According to John, when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then to the disciple, 'Here is your mother'. At times of intense pain, most of us are only capable of thinking of ourselves; Jesus was unselfishly caring for his mother and his best friend.

St Mark writes, 'At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani', ' My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Matthew has the same thing. Jesus entered fully into our human experience, even to the extent of feeling as though God had deserted him.

The words are a quote from psalm 22, which ends on a joyful note. It's as though he had to work bravely through his despair in order to return to hope.

'After this', writes St John, 'when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil scripture), "I am thirsty". Psalm 69 includes the words, 'When I was thirsty, they gave me vinegar to drink.' Jesus who was fully human, was dehydrated after 3 hours in the heat of the noonday sun. But he was also fully divine, and he thirsted to obey the will of his Father.

'When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." This is a cry of triumph; Jesus seized victory from the jaws of defeat. 'Love's redeeming work is done'.

'The Jesus' concludes St Luke, 'crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this he breathed his last.' This is a quotation from psalm 31, and may well have been a prayer of faith which Jesus, in common with many other people, used to say just before he went to sleep each night.

Seven famous last words from the cross. Each of them reveals a particular virtue which we can imitate. The first, his forgiveness of sinners. Then his encouragement of the hopeless. Third his compassion for others, his mother and his friend. Fourth his courage; and fifth his obedience to the Father. 'It is finished' reveals his ability to recognise that submission is often the greatest triumph. Seventh and last is his trust in his Father. I wonder... could we live like that? Could we die like that?

Of course not. But we can try. Amen