

Famous Last Words

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*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing ...
I tell you the truth, today you be with me, in paradise ...
Father, into your hands I commit spirit.*
(Lk 23:34, 43, 46).

There is something particularly interesting about the last words which people speak before they die. Sometimes it is because they have a certain ironic quality about them, which gave rise to the sarcastic remark 'famous last words' directed at people who tempt fate by what they say. The classic example was General Sedgewick, a commander in the American Civil War who, at the battle of Spotsylvania in 1864, foolishly looked over a parapet at the enemy lines below and declared: 'They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist'

Last words are also sometimes memorable because of their humour. I rather like Oscar Wilde's reputed dying ultimatum: 'Either this wallpaper goes or I do!' Or there is that gem from the lips of Ned Kelly, the Australian desperado, who just before he was executed in 1890 sighed: 'Ah well, such is life!'

But beyond all the wit and irony and even pathos that sometimes accompany last words, there is often also a deep seriousness. It was Dr Johnson who remarked: 'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully'. A dying man, if he has the opportunity to consider the matter, is unlikely to waste the little breath he has left in uttering trivia. Rather he will use his words carefully, addressing those things about which he feels most intensely. That is why last words are sometimes so revealing; they give us a unique insight into the personality of the one who utters them.

All this gives a very special significance to this passage in Luke's Gospel, for here he records what must be regarded as the most important and poignant last words ever uttered - the last words of Jesus spoken before and during his final agony on the cross. Of course, it is important to realise that Luke has been selective. Jesus said other things at this time, some of which have been recorded by the other Gospel writers. But Luke has chosen the last words of Jesus which he reckoned to be the most significant; the things Jesus said which in Luke's mind epitomised him and what he had come to do. There are four and we shall consider them in turn.

Words of Warning

As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, ' Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children' (Lk 23:26-28)

The other three gospels all affirm that Jesus was flogged before he was sent to the place of execution. The Roman scourge was a vicious instrument, so it is not surprising that Jesus was reduced to such a state of weakness that he was unable to carry the timber for his cross. It

seems likely, though, that Luke saw this as divine providence because it forced his captors to commandeer the services of this hapless North African who happened to have arrived in the city at that moment.

The imaginations of later Christians have woven all kinds of traditions about Simon of Cyrene, most of which are undoubtedly fictitious. But there probably is a story to be told about him, even though we do not the details. Although there is nothing in the text to indicate that he was anything more than a passing stranger, totally ignorant of Jesus at this point in his life, there is some reason to believe that his family subsequently became Christians. The ground for this that the evangelist Mark records not only Simon's name but also those of his two sons, Alexander and Rufus, and there seems little reason for him to do that unless these two men were well known in the early church. So it is far from impossible that this unexpected and unwelcome piece of Roman press-ganging was used in the providence of God to kindle Simon's interest in Jesus. Who knows, perhaps he was among those 'Jews and proselytes from Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene' whom we later learn were gathered at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and from whom the first three thousand converts of church history were drawn (Acts 2).

Regrettably, we can only speculate about that as Luke is not so much interested in Simon as in what was going on in the crowd behind him, particularly among the women who accompanied the already exhausted and drooping figure of Jesus as he stumbled along the Via Dolorosa on the last half mile of his pathway to the cross. Luke tells us that they wailed and mourned for him. This is almost certainly a reference to the kind of ululation or ritualised howling which was and is still practised in some parts of the world as a way of expressing public grief. In Britain we are inclined to fight back our tears at a funeral and to mourn in silence, but Hebrew culture favoured a much less inhibited exhibition of sorrow on such occasions. Women, in particular, would very often chant laments and weep in a rather exaggerated manner so as to stimulate general emotional catharsis and prevent any unhealthy bottling up of grief. The interesting thing is that while Jesus was not offended by their rather macabre publication of his impending funeral, he did consider it inappropriate. Not because it was tactlessly premature, but because it was personally misdirected.

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills "Cover us!" ' For if men do these things When the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?
(Lk 23:28-31).

The picture of an all-devouring forest fire is a common metaphor in the Old Testament for divine judgement and that is almost certainly the allusion Jesus was making in the puzzling words of verse 31. He may even have been referring obliquely to a text at the end of Ezekiel 20, where the prophet speaks of the Sovereign Lord setting fire to the land of Judah and consuming all its trees both green and dry, a symbolic description of the inescapable consequences of the Babylonian conquest. Certainly verse 30 contains a direct quotation from Hosea 10, which again is about the imminent destruction of Israel's religious sanctuaries and the vain attempts of the Jewish population to find refuge and concealment from the invading armies of Assyria. So verses 30 and 31 both have references to divine retribution on the land of Israel at the hands of pagan armies, and such references would have been familiar to many of Jesus' hearers.

What is interesting, however, is Jesus' use of these Old Testament motifs here. He did not believe the significance of these passages had been exhausted in the events of the past to which they originally referred. Another day is coming, he said, when such words will be all too relevant once again to people of Jerusalem. In fact, with the commentator G B Caird, we might paraphrase verse 31 in this way: 'If the flames of Roman impatience with Israel are hot enough to destroy one whom her own courts pronounced innocent, what must the nation of Israel expect when Roman justice finds her guilty?'

Luke tells us that only a week before, on the first Palm Sunday, when Jesus had come within sight of Jerusalem, he wept over it because he saw that days of siege were coming: 'They are going to cast up embankments around Jerusalem. They will dash you to ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone standing on another,' he predicted. And why? 'Because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you.'

I think that it must be precisely the same warning that Jesus issues again here to these wailing women. 'Don't you realise,' he said, 'God is going to pay back this city for the atrocity they are about to commit today. And the judgement that he will bring on this place because of its rejection of me and the kind of messianic kingdom for which I stand will be every bit as gruesome as that cross Simon of Cyrene is carrying for me up ahead. No, daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves'. As if to drive home to them the full horror of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus announced to these women one last terrifying beatitude. 'Blessed are the childless! They will be counted the lucky ones; at least the barren women will not have the anguish they suffer exacerbated by the sight of their murdered children. A time of such appalling disaster is coming that against all the prejudices of your Jewish culture, and all your natural maternal instincts, you women will count it a blessing to be infertile. Do not weep for me then. If you want to raise a funeral lament, sing it for yourselves and your children. You are the ones to pitied!'

Maybe this is a word of relevance for some of us today, too. The story of the crucifixion of Jesus is immensely emotive. Some of us have probably been moved to tears by the dramatisations we have seen of it on the stage or at the cinema. Hymns like 'There is a green hill' or 'When survey the wondrous cross' are loaded with sentimental associations particularly when sung on Good Friday. Jesus here does not despise such emotion in any way, but like the wailing of these Jewish women, he would perhaps chide us gently about its inappropriateness.

The dying Jesus neither seeks nor needs our sympathy. On the contrary, as he sees it, it is we who need his. There is no self-pity in this man of Galilee as he makes his way to Golgotha. All his pity is for us, for we are the ones under judgement. If God tore Jerusalem down in his indignation at her of his Son, what will he do to us, do you think, on the last day, if he finds us guilty of very same crime? The book of Revelation tells us that in the day of judgement men will call to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us! Hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.'

We must not be misled, then, by the sentimentality of our age. The purpose of the cross is not to affect our emotions so that we feel sorry for Jesus. The purpose of the cross is to awaken our consciences so that we sorry for our sins. It is not tears of commiseration that Jesus is looking for, but tears of repentance. A warning, then, for those who pitied him. That was the first use Jesus made of his precious last words.

Words of love

When they came to the place The Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said. 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'
(Lk 23:33-34).

One of the things you have to admire about the New Testament evangelists is their unwillingness to exploit the emotions of their readers when they describe the crucifixion. Their restraint in recounting or rather refusing to recount the gruesome physical details is very conspicuous. In fact, we only know that Jesus was nailed rather than tied to the cross because of later post-resurrection references to the scars in his hands.

But it has to be said that, for any of Luke's contemporaries, that single verb 'crucified' in verse 33 would have been quite enough on its own to conjure a scene of dreadful horror in their minds- They had seen such executions. They knew what was involved. They knew how a crucified victim died, slowly and painfully, often over days, straining against the weight of his body for every breath he took until finally, weakened to the point of total exhaustion, he surrendered either to suffocation or heart failure.

The barbarism of this method of execution is hidden from us not just by unfamiliarity but by two thousand years of Christian tradition, which have glamorised the cross and made it into an ornament to adorn our churches or even to wear around our necks. A clergyman in Philadelphia once attempted to overcome this romanticisation of the crucifixion by placing the golden cross on the altar on Good Friday by a miniature replica of the electric chair. This caused a frightful row in his respectable congregation as you can imagine. They were dreadfully offended by this monstrous obscenity in the very holiest part of their sanctuary, and yet the gesture was a valid one. Electrocuting is not only much quicker and less painful than crucifixion, it is indescribably less shameful, for there was no private execution chamber behind prison walls for Jesus. The crucified man was hung before the mockery of the mob, and as the comments about his clothes in verse 34 very tactfully remind us, he was hung there naked.

It is that addition of insult to injury which, Luke seems to feel, placed the final seal upon the guilt of those who crowded around the cross. Whether it was the idle, callous curiosity of the crowd who stood watching like the audience at the Roman circus, no doubt fascinated by the gory spectacle. Or the vulgar frivolity of the soldiers, offering him wine and making a party of it. Or the derisive contempt of the rulers – 'He saved others; let him save himself' (Lk 23:35). In their hour of victory, they found no crumb of compassion for the one against whom they had so viciously plotted. It was all degrading. And there above his head was official notice of the charge placed there by Pilate, John tells us, in order to spite the Jewish rulers and yet adding its own note of ridicule to the scene. A cross, after all, is a pretty strange throne for one who would be called 'King of the Jews' (Lk 23:38).

Yet the extraordinary thing is that according to the eye-witness testimony on which Luke depends for his account, neither the physical pain of the cross nor the public shame associated with it provoked the least bitterness in Jesus. We hear no vindictive cursing of his tormentors; we detect no rancorous spirit of revenge. Instead we hear a prayer - a prayer which, although it has been emulated by many since, was totally unprecedented at the time of its original utterance: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23:34).

Some have found difficulty with those words. Surely, they argue, everyone there who was involved with this crucifixion was fully aware of the injustice of it all. Everyone knew perfectly well that Jesus was not worthy of death, for Pilate himself had said so. This judicial murder was no sin of ignorance, so how could Jesus pretend that it was? Some therefore suggest that this prayer was offered only on behalf of the Roman soldiers on the grounds that they carried out the crucifixion under orders and not out of personal spite. But I find that a rather strange suggestion. After all, the point of Jesus' prayer is not that his tormentors were victims of the kind of ignorance that excused their crime, or all talk of pardon would have been out of place. In that case, he would have said, 'Father, understand them,' not, 'Father, forgive them.' No, the ignorance to which Jesus refers here is the ignorance which all sinners demonstrate in their sin - the culpable ignorance that shuts its mind to the voice of truth and the testimony of conscience.

Others have found difficulty with this prayer because it seems, from the later fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, that his supplication was denied. God obviously did not forgive this city that crucified him, they say, and that may be why this verse has been discreetly omitted in some early manuscripts. Once again, I confess that I find such arguments pedantic in the extreme. This prayer is not some universal or partial absolution, but a gesture of love. Jesus is simply following the precept which he himself had laid down in his teaching:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may sons of your Father in heaven (Mt 5:43-45).

He Who commanded such a spirit of forgiveness in his followers is here demonstrating such a spirit of forgiveness in his own hour of crisis. He prays this prayer not just for the soldiers, not just the crowd, not just for Pilate, not just the Jewish rulers - he prays it for us too.

For is it not true to say that all of us have mocked the dying Christ? Not so crudely, maybe, as some there in the hour of his death, but we in our own way have jeered at his claims to divinity. 'Calls himself the Son of God, why he's just a Galilean freedom-fighter crucified for threatening the security of the Roman state like hundreds of others. As to those claims of his to save people, well, it's all self-hypnosis isn't it? Delusions, some myth created by his followers after he died because they couldn't cope psychologically with his loss.'

So we dismiss him, reject him and scorn him. Indeed, some of us are still doing so, for though we have heard the story of the cross over and over again, we refuse to let it change our lives. We refuse to that our sins contributed to his pain. We have closed our minds and hardened our hearts against him. Well, Luke would have us realise, even as we do that, Jesus prays for us in all our foolish and wilful ignorance, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know they're doing.'

Words of hope

The big question is, of course: whether we want to be forgiven, whether we are willing to give up our place among the contemptuous and, in response to these words of love, to accept a new place among the faithful. This, surely, is why Luke has gone on to record the third of Jesus' last words - the hope he offered to one who believed in him.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said,

'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise' (Lk 23:39-43)

If we are honest, I think most of us would have to admit that we find funerals disturbing occasions. That is so even when the deceased is somebody to whom we are not particularly close. The thought invariably presses itself upon our minds as we look at that coffin sliding into the grave, 'One day it is going to be my turn.' As Woody Allen says, 'It is not that we are afraid to die, we just don't want to be there when it happens.'

But, of course, we will be there one day. Bookmakers will accept a bet on just about anything in this world, but you will not find one who will give you odds on your living for ever. Death is a certainty. Sooner or later it will be our turn, and that is what makes these verses so very important. They show us very clearly that there are two ways to die. It is possible to die without Jesus. That was the way the first criminal chose to go, resentful about what was happening to him and scornful of the God who had allowed it. He remained firmly wedded to that circle of contempt that surrounded Jesus and added to it his own bitter echo. He hurled blasphemies at him, Luke tells us, demanding sarcastically, 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us.'

Here was a man who chose to die as he had lived, in truculent disdain of all things religious. He was not the first and would not be the last to go to the grave, or even to the scaffold, jeering at any man of faith who came near him. It is tragic to witness a death like that, for it is a death without peace and without hope. Yet every day men and women choose to die that way. Every day widows and widowers are forced to mourn that way. And what dark and cheerless occasions those funerals are.

But there is another way to die, and a better one. It is possible to die without Jesus, but it is also possible to die with him - and that was the way in which the second criminal chose to go. 'Jesus', he said, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.' It is important to realise that this fellow was not a better man than his colleague. He was no saint; he was not religious or upright. He was a self-confessed rogue. He says so: 'We are justly under the sentence of death.'

What is more, it is difficult to say how much he understood by those words 'your kingdom' in verse 42. Was this a man who had listened to Jesus' teaching and now, on the verge of eternity, was demonstrating a classic death-bed repentance? It would be nice to think so, but the text is far too brief to be sure about that. Some people have even suggested that he was just being kind, trying to soften the cruelty of his tactless colleague's mockery by humouring this would-be Messiah. I cannot believe that Jesus' response would have been so reassuring had he detected any element of insincerity in the man's words. But we must certainly beware of exaggerating this man's theological understanding or the depth of his penitence. Here is a man about to die. It is a gasp of hope that we hear: 'Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.'

Something about Jesus had impressed this hardened criminal. Something, perhaps, of the stark contrast between his prayer for his tormentors and his friend's bitter hostility towards them. Jesus was an innocent man - you didn't have to hear all the evidence to come to that conclusion, it was written all over his face. 'This man has done nothing wrong,' he said, and however criminal his own life may have been, this second man feared God enough to recognise the advantage of such an impeccable reputation on the day of judgement. 'Jesus,

remember me when you come into your kingdom,' he said. Perhaps his eleventh-hour repentance was a mere clutching at straws, a faith no bigger than a mustard seed, kindled on the very threshold of death. But even if it was as superficial as that, Jesus did not allow that faith to go unrewarded. 'I tell you the truth,' he said, 'today you will be with me in paradise.'

In these words, he assured this new and very hesitant believer of two vital things. First, he assured him that his death would not be a hopeless experience. 'Today,' he said, 'you will be with *me in paradise*.' No hell, no purgatory, but a new world of unspoilt bliss entered immediately, for the valley of death had been negotiated.

Secondly, he said that his death would not be a lonely experience. 'Today you will be *with me*.' To die with Jesus is something quite different from dying without him. Which side of the cross do you plan to be in the last hour of your life? Among the contemptuous still without Christ, or among the believing with him? For there are really only two ways to die.

Words of commitment

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last (Lk 23:44-46).

As we said earlier, crucifixion often took days. But in Jesus' case it was all over by three o'clock in the afternoon. That in itself is remarkable, but not as remarkable perhaps as the ominous and supernatural signs which Luke says hushed the mockery of the crowds in the closing hours of his passion and sent them away, no longer haughty but beating their breasts.

First, there was the darkness at noon. Luke and all other Gospel writers tell us it happened. The sun did not shine that day for three solid hours. If you hadn't known better, you would have said that it was a total eclipse. But it was Passover and therefore full moon, and every amateur astronomer knows that you cannot have an eclipse of the sun and a full moon at same time, for it would require the moon to be in two places at once. No, this darkness was supernatural, as if heaven itself were hiding its eyes from what was happening.

Secondly, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. The curtain that Luke is referring to was almost certainly the one that separated the Holy of Holies from the outer chamber of the Temple, and its tearing would have been an event laden with significance for any Jew. It signalled access into the intimate presence God in a way that had been forbidden ever since the time of Moses. The death of Jesus had transformed the spiritual dynamics of man's relationship with God.

Thirdly, Jesus cried out with a loud voice. The supernatural element in that is easily missed by those unfamiliar with crucifixion, but I do not think Luke's original readers would have had any trouble in identifying it. The one thing a crucified man could never do, particularly in the latter stages of his suffering, was to shout. To be able to summon the strength to call out with a loud voice clearly suggests that Jesus was not physically about to expire at all. Yet he does, and the words with which he chooses to depart are in their way as remarkable as anything that has gone before: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'

These are last words which many have chosen to repeat at the point of death, including St John of the Cross and Christopher Columbus. But they were novel in Jesus' day. Jews did not usually think of death as something to be welcomed in this way. Luke's Christian readers would not have missed the implication that death did not conquer Jesus as it conquers other people. On the contrary, he voluntarily surrendered to death. As he once said himself, 'No man takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own free will' (Jn 10:18). And that is What he did here: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last' (Lk 23:46). Death for him was something it never can be for - a choice. Maybe that is why he died so quickly. The timing of his death was in his own hands and not those of some arbitrary fate.

I have little doubt that it was the observation of Jesus' imperious manner of dying, following all the other strange omens that surrounded the closing hours of his life, that led the officer in charge of this crucifixion to his personal verdict recorded in verse 47. No doubt he had seen many men expire on the cross and he knew the way such men usually died, in hatred and weakness. But he had listened to the prayer. He had felt the darkness. Most Of all, he had heard that final cry. As Mark tells us, it was when he 'saw *how* Jesus died' that he responded: 'Surely this was a righteous man.'

And righteous he certainly was, the most righteous man that ever walked this earth. No deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. Instead he entrusted himself to him who, unlike the corrupt courts of this world, judges justly. In that voluntary sacrifice, the Bible tells us, he bore our sins in his on the tree (see I Peter 2:22-24).

He had no personal sin to die for because he had not committed any. Why then was he dying? The whole of the New Testament, the whole of the universal Christian church, the very voice of the Holy Spirit within your heart as you read, tell you Why. He died for us. The punishment for our sins was laid on him. That is why there was hope for that dying criminal. That is why is hope for us.

Last words are indeed very important words and Jesus didn't waste his. He used them to warn us of judgment to come: 'Don't weep for me, weep for yourselves.' He used them to demonstrate his love for us: 'Father, forgive them'. He used them to promise hope for us: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' But supremely, he used them to offer his body as a Sacrifice to God for us so that when the time comes for to die, we might be able to say as confidently as he did: '*Father!*'