

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”
 (The Seven Last Words of Jesus: The Sixth Word)

Luke 23:44-49

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian
 Church of Portland, Indiana on Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016]

I

We are now very close to the end.

Jesus’ body has taken about all that it can.

From nine o’clock in the morning
 until almost three o’clock in the afternoon
 Jesus hangs suspended between heaven and earth,
 as the life has slowly drains from his body.

And now comes the end.

A loud voice cries out...
 a last gasp of tortured breath is heard...
 and then these simple words are spoken:

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

II

According to Luke, these are Jesus’ final words.

But just as with the earlier Fourth Word from the cross—
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—
 the Sixth Word is also a quotation from the Psalms.

These words come from Psalm 31, verse 5,
 with Jesus adding the word “father.”

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Jesus died with a Jewish prayer on his lips.

One of the first prayers Jewish mothers taught their children was Psalm 31:5.

The first prayer many of us were taught was that little bed time prayer:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

The Jewish mother taught her children to pray at the coming of night,
Into your hands I commend my spirit.

Remember that Jesus' first prayer on the cross was addressed to his heavenly Father—

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

So it should not surprise us that as death draws near he again prays to his heavenly Father—

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

As Adam Hamilton reminds us,

“This was Jesus' dying prayer. It was a prayer of absolute trust in God. Jesus had forgiven his enemies, offered mercy to a thief, prayed for his mother, come to a place where he felt abandoned by God, and expressed his physical thirst; but before his death...he offered this beautiful prayer of absolute trust in his Father.”

Luke gives us these final words of Jesus, and then adds,

“Having said this, he breathed his last.”

Life ends for Jesus the same way it ends for each of us.

That is what it means to be a human being—we all must face death.

The moment will come for you, for me, for every human being...

when our heart ceases to beat,
the air stops flowing in and out of our lungs,
and the skin that was warm with life grows cold and grey.

Jesus became a person “like as we are,”
and faced all the trials, temptations, and terrors that we must face.

He traveled the same road we must travel.

The end of that road came to Jesus as it comes to each of us...
the point where the final enemy, death, is faced,
and there is nothing left with which to fight that enemy...
no ambition,
no ego,
no will power,
no strength,
no desire,
and no breath.

That is where the end of life’s road always leaves us.

And that is where Jesus meets us with his quiet confession of trust in God:
Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

III

In this Sixth Word from the cross, Jesus teaches us both how to live life **and** how to face death.

Jesus gave himself totally and completely to God’s will.

It is the greatest sacrifice the world has ever seen.

In so doing, **Jesus showed us how to live life.**

And how did he do that?

Well, let me ask you: What does it mean to give ourselves totally to God?

At the most basic level, it means following God’s commandments and seeking to live a Christian life.

But it also means something else...something more.

Let me suggest two things.

First, it means holding nothing back from God.

Are there parts of our lives that we keep from God?...

a grudge,

a sinful habit,

a pattern of selfish behavior,

a desire for status and power,

a need to acquire more wealth, more possessions.

In general, we all lead good lives,

but if we are honest, most of us,

perhaps even all of us,

would admit that we withhold a part of ourselves from God.

We say, “You can have everything else, God, but not this.”

But, following Jesus’ example, we are asked to turn it all over to God—

to give ourselves totally and completely to God.

Second, giving ourselves totally to God means surrendering to the future God has in store for us.

We may not know what that future is.

We may not understand it.

We may even be afraid of it.

But we are called to surrender ourselves to that future—
as Jesus did.

What will happen when we surrender?

We can’t know.

Did Jesus know?

Theologians have argued for centuries about how much Jesus understood about God's plan.

Did he really know that after the cross would come the resurrection?

I like how Father James Martin puts it:

“For me, Jesus’s sacrifice on Good Friday is even more powerful if he did not fully know what awaited him. Maybe on Easter Sunday even Jesus Christ was surprised. Perhaps he fully knew only *then* who he was. As one theologian has written, on Easter Sunday perhaps Jesus’s identity ‘burst upon him in all clarity.’ On Easter he knew—fully. Soon the whole world would know.”

So here is another place where Jesus’ life intersects our lives,
where Jesus understands what we go through.

He understands that when we give ourselves to the Father,
we may not know what kind of new life can come from that surrendering.

The more we give of ourselves,
the more we will know who we are.

The more we give of ourselves,
the fuller lives we will lead.

So, into your hands, O God, we commend our spirits.

IV

Jesus showed us how to live life **and he showed us how to face death.**

The Sixth Word stresses the finality of death that all human beings will face,
which Jesus shared with us,
and it is *a word of faith and assurance* in the face of that finality.

When Jesus said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,”
he was putting his life totally into the hands of God.

Earlier Jesus taught his disciples to pray what we call *The Lord’s Prayer*—

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Here on the cross, Jesus is again teaching his disciples how to pray

When we face darkness and despair,
 when we face the valley of the shadow of death,
 when we face the unknown,
 what should we pray?

How about: *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”*

As we saw two weeks ago, Matthew and Mark attribute to Jesus the most desperate verse of Psalm 22—

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Here Luke attributes to Jesus the most trusting verse of Psalm 31—

“Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Even on the cross,
 in his darkest moment,
 Jesus had an unflinching trust in the goodness of God.

These words of Jesus are a final proclamation of that trust.

Nothing,
 not even the agony of the cross,
 could change Jesus’ witness to the love
 and concern,
 and ultimate victory of God.

The great Bible scholar and translator James Moffatt translated the words of Jesus this way:

“Father, I trust my spirit to your hands.”

Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way:

“Father, I place my life in your hands!”

This sums up what both life and death meant to Jesus.

He trusted God to bring him through life’s final curtain call.

It wasn't easy and it wasn't play acting.

And many times Jesus was tempted to abandon it all.

Remember how in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed,
"Father, let this cup pass from me."

But then came the moment of quiet resolve and determined commitment:
"Not my will but yours be done."

And then there was that time of doubt
 that moment of dereliction on the cross,
 when Jesus cried out,
 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But at the end,
 in the face of death itself,
 Jesus was able to respond in faith—
Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

V

I read of a prominent seminary professor, a noted theologian. He and his wife gave birth to their only child, a son, when they were in their forties, and then they lost their son to a rare disease when he was but 23 years old.

Out of his great grief, this bereaved father said,

"The Christian life is lived in between—
 in between *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*
 and *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*"

Because we, by faith, are assimilated to Christ in his death,
 we also are assimilated to him in his life beyond death.

In his suffering, we find our redemption.

In his abandonment, we find our acceptance.

In his dereliction, we find our salvation.

And at the last we, even in the midst of perplexity and doubt,
are able to say, as Jesus our Lord and Savior said:

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Jesus faced death the very same way he lived life.

It is not as though the Son of God went through his whole life and then at the end,
when time had run out,
he decided to call on God.

Jesus had always called on God.

From his days as a child learning the psalms at his mother's knee,
to that final moment on the cross,

Jesus had prayed,

"Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Numerous times he said that he had come to do not his own will,
but the will of the One who sent him.

Jesus lived his life in God's hands.

He died with his life in God's hands.

It is the same for you and me.

We die the same way we have lived.

What will my dying be like?... you ask.

How is it with your living?

Are you consciously living your life in the hands of God?

VI

This business of living as a human being is not always warm fuzzies,
peace and light,

and it is not always sunshine and roses.

Palm Sunday is a vivid illustration of this fact.

Jesus enters Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd.

He seems to have everything going for him and the world is his oyster.

But in just five days the One whom the crowd proclaimed as Messiah is crucified as a common criminal.

No wonder the burial service of the Book of Common Prayers reads,
“In the midst of life, we are in death.”

Sometimes we expect things to be easy,
and they are hard.

We expect a check in the mail,
and get a notice of insufficient funds instead.

We expect things to be happy,
and they are sad.

We expect someone to get better,
and they die.

We expect a success,
and we have a failure.

We expect to find love
and we get hurt.

We expect the Christian life to make us popular,
and we lose friends.

That is when our faith in God becomes the ultimate issue.

Will we trust in God in the good times,
the uneventful times,
so that we can call on God in the times of crisis and need?

all for the sake of bringing you and me into the presence
of that very same Father forever.

The great Scottish Presbyterian preacher of the 19th century, Alexander Maclaren once preached a Good Friday sermon in which he said:

*“My words, I feel, in this sermon, have been very poor;
but poor as they have been, if you have listened to them,
you will not be exactly the same [person] as you have been.”*

Listen: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has his hand on you.

You can trust in that God.

In this moment you can give yourself up to the prayer of our Redeemer
and commit yourself both in life and in death
to our loving Father through him.

Your crucified Lord holds his arms out to you in the love that will not let you go.

Will you, like Jesus, be able to pray,
in simple, child-like trust,
“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”?

Amen.

Sources:

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