

## **THE FIRST WORD: 'FATHER, FORGIVE THEM'**

Luke 23.33-34a

Meditation on the first word – Daniel von Allmen

In fact it is two words: "Father, forgive them", and  
"They do not know what they are doing".

"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM"

This [SHOW]... is a photo I took near Santiago de Chile, in 1983, in the middle of the reign of general Pinochet.

A painting made by children on a bed sheet, attached to – should I call it the façade - of the town hall of a huge city of tents giving temporary accommodation to 20.000 people – the town hall? A large tent as well.

It's the illustration of words we find in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's Gospel, as well as in Luke:

"(You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy'). But I say to you, 'Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who abuse and persecute you (so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous)".

**Love your enemies... pray for those who abuse and persecute you...**

What gave Jesus authority to expect so much of his disciples?

--- **It's the fact that he would be the first to practise it.**

His first word on the Cross is **not a curse**, but a **prayer** for the ones who crucified him.

It's what the children of Santiago and their leaders have understood:

Jesus who speaks – "But I tell you" – bears all the marks of the crucifixion.

"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM"

And then

"FOR THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING"

I am not sure whether there is any truly logical relationship between these two words, the one illustrated by the children of Santiago,

and the one I have tried to illustrate

THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING.

But today it's not really my problem.

What I want(ed) to do

Is not an explanation

Of a Bible text.

I ask(ed) what it means  
That Jesus died on the Cross.  
Others have answered.

Not only St Luke, (23, 34)  
But before and after him  
Many believers:

The Gospel of Mark (10, 45)

**Mark 10:45** the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for a multitude."

And later the one who wrote  
"John's Revelation". (22, 2)

**Revelation 22:1-2** Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; **and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.**

Father, forgive them  
Forgive, for they do not know  
What they are doing.

What are they doing?  
They help him to give his life  
For a multitude.

And now He will stand  
In the New Jerusalem  
As the Tree of Life.

What are its leaves for?  
The healing of the Nations.  
God has forgiven.

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"  
Traditional  
Sung by Doris Naana Nunoo  
**Silence** ending with a prayer

**Prayer inspired by Isaiah 53,4-5 and Psalm 51:1-2**

Some may think that **you** are punished and struck with affliction by God,  
but **ours** are the sufferings you are bearing, **ours** the sorrows you are carrying.  
You are wounded for **our** transgressions, crushed for **our** iniquities;  
upon you is the punishment that makes **us** whole, and by your bruises **we are healed**.

I hear you saying,

“Father, forgive them...”

And it sounds like an echo of a Psalm:

“In your faithful love, in your great tenderness  
wipe away their offences;  
<sup>2</sup>wash them clean from their guilt”.

*Before you die, Jesus Christ,  
take from our lives,  
from our souls,  
from our consciences,  
all that has offended you,  
all that has hurt others,  
and the lack of sensitivity  
that has made us numb to the plight  
of those whom we could help or heal.*

*Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world,  
**have mercy on us.***

*Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world,  
**have mercy on us.***

*Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world,  
**grant us your peace.***

*On this day, at this time,  
irrespective of our faith or lack of it,  
we accept deeply in our hearts  
the only words that can set us free:*

*your sins are forgiven.*

**Amen.**

*Stages on the Way, Wild Goose Worship Group 1998, p. 154-155*

## **SECOND WORD: 'TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE'**

Luke 23.34b-43

Meditation on the second word – David Cruise

On that hill called Calvary there stood three crosses. On one hung Jesus. On the others hung two criminals. And we read that those two criminals reacted in very different ways.

One joined in the ribald humour of the moment. That humour that pushes to the very limits and becomes ever more vulgar – anything for a laugh – no holds barred – nothing is sacred – let alone Jesus.

But for the other criminal, against all the odds, and amid the appalling helplessness and agony - there arose deep within him a hidden hopefulness.

Hopefulness - hope, hope that can surprise us and which indeed goes to the very heart of faith.

For the wonder is that to come to the end of the line can mean discovering oneself and lead to insights into deep truths that are available only in what appears a hopeless situation.

There is no certainty in this. Sometimes the end is the end as far as we can see. But for many it has meant at last seeing a way through.

This criminal, who has been described by Neville Ward, a previous minister of this church, as 'the last friend of Jesus', in his last hours sees something new about life. He sees who is in the right and who is in the wrong in this world of conflicting claims and values. Above all, he experiences in those moments, a feeling of kinship – a oneness with this man with whom he is sharing moments of suffering and destruction.

In the flame that suffering sometimes lights in the mind, he sees there is more to living and dying than he has guessed and that that 'more' has much to do with the one who hangs at his side.

Somehow, somewhere, he knows the tables will be turned and the defeated man of Nazareth will be seen to be the one in whom is life, truth and indeed hope.

So the criminal rides into death on the back of the new found hope and trust.

'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Hoping and trusting in Christ means going forward to whatever the future holds with Christ, God's living word. For this criminal the next thing is death, but he goes into it with Christ.

And what about 'paradise'? To quote Neville Ward again 'actually it is immaterial what 'Paradise' means. What matters is that there is still one who hangs on the cross beside us - for Christ still bears the marks of the nails in his hands and his feet. And in him is our hope now and for ever

'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' - Amen

#### Prayer

Lord Jesus, word of God, who loved even as you hung in agony on the cross and brought hope to the criminal that hung beside you, we would at this time open up ourselves to such love. We don't know what the future holds for ourselves and for those closest to us but we pray that we may go forward in faith and hope knowing that you will always be there beside us.

In such confidence and hope we pray for all who at this time experience a cross of pain, anxiety, and fearfulness for the future. May they even in the darkest times see a light of hope before them.

Jesus, remember them. Jesus, remember us. Jesus, remember me. Amen.

### **THIRD WORD: 'WOMAN, HERE IS YOUR SON; HERE IS YOUR MOTHER'**

John 19. 23-27a

Meditation on the third word – Carole Irwin

To his mother, Jesus says "Woman, here is your son"; and to the disciple he loved, "Here is your mother"... Words spoken across the wreckage of the community which had formed around Jesus. They had been bound together by a life orientated towards the reign of God; in a new set of relationships, a new way of being in the world together, unfettered by conventional, self-serving, self-preserving ties of blood or kinship: '*Who are my mother and my brothers? Those who do the will of my Father in heaven.*'

The community that was centred on Jesus – someone utterly given-over to the risks and vulnerability of relationship, undefended, holding nothing back – is in pieces. Under pressure, it had splintered. One of his closest and most trusted companions facilitated Jesus' arrest; another publicly denied any relationship to him at all; almost all the rest are gone, leaving him to die, alone.

From the debris of it all, a word is spoken to two inconsolable people. A word of invitation, a call back towards relationship, self-giveness, community...to a re-making, even here amongst the ruins; a summons into reconstitution...

This isn't straightforward. His mother might be forgiven for seeing this one remaining disciple simply as someone to blame for the conflict and controversy that brought Jesus, and them, to Golgotha; someone at whom she might hurl the howling pain and fury. The disciple Jesus loved has every reason simply to despise her –who is portrayed elsewhere as utterly uncomprehending: trying to make her son just stop it and come home. They have no reasons to trust or to try – quite the opposite.

I'm not sure if this is comfort Jesus is offering – an act of care and consideration for his nearest and dearest. It sounds more like a call - into a remaking of the world.

But that begins not here, with anything they, or anyone else, can do, but somewhere else, with the work God is doing.

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"Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother". In the telling of the story of the crucifixion in the Gospel of John, these are the first words Jesus speaks from the cross. They break a silence. Mary and the beloved disciple never break theirs.

There are words we properly read and speak on Good Friday; there are hymns we sing; there's imagery, there's the bare church – without flowers or decorations. And in and through the words and music and symbolism we try to summon up the emotions proper to

this day of day; this death of deaths.

But the story we tell and the events it recounts are mostly made up of silences. The woman and man standing near are silent here. There are the silences that we try to carve out and 'keep' during this Good Friday service, in an act of mutual trust where we hold open a space for one another...

Then there's the silence that will finally fall at the end of today, and this week, when there are no more words to say and nothing to be done, and perhaps the feeling that nothing we could have said or sung would have been adequate, no emotional response anything like enough.

The silence that falls after Good Friday lasts right through into Holy Saturday. It's telling that after all the activity of Holy Week, we're significantly, liturgically, silent for a day – tomorrow - in what is the central week of the whole Christian year.

All of which is fundamentally right. Because what matters most today is what's done elsewhere, by God - somehow at work in the cruelty and injustice of the death of Jesus to completely turn around the way the world works.

And the silence and waiting? It's not that we're expected to do or feel something, or be somewhere else, and just haven't worked out what, or where. There's nothing *to do* – the work isn't in our hands.

To try in some way to wait with those who wait, silently – when there are no more words, nothing more to be done - is to be invited to experience the matter *being* out of our hands. Work is being done - intense and costly – but elsewhere, and not by us, as God, in and through this life, this death, is reconstituting the world.

#### **FOURTH WORD: 'MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?'**

Mark 15.25-34

Meditation on the fourth word – Val Reid

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we had a children's party.

We ate sandwiches and chocolate Krispie cakes and jelly and ice cream.

We played pass the parcel.

Musical statues.

But the most popular game was hide and seek.

The children wouldn't stop playing.

They loved the concept of not being able to find someone.

Felix was definitely the best hider.

It took the others a long time to find him under a pile of coats, or behind a pushchair.

Sometimes they lost interest in seeking, and went off to have a cake.

But the game was fun because, in the end, everybody came out of hiding.

Everybody was found.

The problem with God is that God seems to play hide and seek with us.

And sometimes he simply cannot be found.

*Hester Panim* – the Hebrew for the hiding of the face – occurs more than 30 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The prophets know about God hiding himself.

So do the psalmists.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Is it because we don't look hard enough?

*I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,* God tells the exiles in Babylon through Isaiah, his prophet.

*Ready to be found by those who did not seek me.*

*I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call my name.*

*Isaiah 65: 1-2a*

Well, yes, sometimes.

But not always.

Sometimes it is because God has withdrawn Godself.

God is utterly silent.

Hebrew scholar Richard Elliott Friedman has written a book called 'The disappearance of God'.

If you read the Bible, he says, starting with the book of Genesis, God slowly fades.



In the beginning God walks with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the evening.  
God chats with Abraham, and argues with him face to face about the fate of Sodom.  
God reveals Godself to Moses on Mount Sinai.  
But when Moses dies, there is no-one left who has actually seen God.  
The last public miracle is when Elijah challenges God to send fire down on the drenched altar on Mount Carmel.  
By the time of the exile, God is a memory, a dream of home, a tradition we cling to, our icon of identity in a foreign land.

Into a world in which God seems absent, Jesus is born.  
At times he is close to his father.  
At times he hears God speak.  
But at times he, too, experiences the absence of God.  
In Gethsemane he begs for a word, but all he has left is the recollection of a voice that once said 'you are my beloved son.'  
On the cross he believes himself, finally, abandoned.  
He is one with the prophets and the exiles and the psalmists.  
He is one with each human being who knows what this desolation feels like.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

He wanted to hear his father speak.  
And he was given silence.  
Silence in which to cry out his loss.

*'Love Dogs' By Rumi*

The grief you cry out from  
draws you towards union.

Your pure sadness  
that wants help  
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog  
for its master.  
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs  
no one knows the names of.

Give your life  
to be one of them.

**Prayer**

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me,  
from the words of my groaning?*

When I search for you, why do you hide from me?  
When I long for your voice, why are you silent?

You are the Word within the world,  
Unable to speak a word.  
You are the Word within the world,  
Longing for a word.

That cry of loneliness  
Is the voice of this God.

An answer will come  
When the silence is complete.

**FIFTH WORD: 'I AM THIRSTY'**

John 19.28 -29

Meditation on the fifth word – James Cruddas

Were these words merely uttered to fulfil scripture?

If so, why do we find it so hard

To identify the text

To which they relate?

Several Psalms could be meant:

22, 42 or 63; more probably 69

Whichever of these – or indeed any other passage – is right

Isn't the real point

John wants to make

To us – all these years later

He surely wants us to understand

That the divine Christ

Who knew His life

Was all but over

Was just as much

the human Jesus

The Word that had been made flesh

Who,

scourged,

bleeding,

hanging,

Could not help become dehydrated

and so thirsty:

But it is not what we expect

Of someone whose power

was shown in His

forgiving sin,

promising paradise

entrusting another with the care of his mother

even demanding to know why God had forsaken Him

We want to ask

How is it that

He who had claimed

All who were thirsty should drink from him;

That those who drank of the water he would give them  
Would never be thirsty  
Is now Himself thirsty?

Then we remember

His humanity:

His tiredness

His weariness

His thirst

Which he shared with us

And when we remember

His being human

Our arid lips

Our parched mouths

Our dry tongues

Are quenched:

Because he knows

What it is to be thirsty

And invites us, as He did

To say so

And to drink

## SIXTH WORD: "IT IS FINISHED"

John 19.29-30

Meditation on the sixth word – Sue Keegan von Allmen

"It is finished". The 6<sup>th</sup> word is not a word of despair, of resignation or tragedy. It's a word of fulfilment, of love perfected, the completion of Jesus' work of making God's love known to the world. What began "*in the beginning*", and continued when "*the Word became flesh and lived among us*", is completed on the cross. And so here we see Christ's "*glory...full of grace and truth*." He has fully lived the life and God gave him to live. He has revealed God's glory. He's completed God's work of sharing God's love with a hostile world, knowing that his words and deeds, indeed his very being, would cost him his life. Yet I cannot read "*it is finished*", without wondering about how this is glory and completion. Jesus dies wounded. And his wounds remain visible when he is raised from the dead. How can this be love perfected? Is it completion? If the wounds remain, can it really, be finished? I wonder about these things because the world I have grown up in, the world we live in, expects the sort of completion, perfection, finishing, in which suffering is ending, pain banished, wounds healed. And scripture encourages us. The image of the new heaven and the new earth in the Book of Revelation is wonderful. God will be found at home, dwelling among us, wiping the tears from our eyes. "*Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*" There will be no suffering, no pain, no exhaustion. All that prevents us from being what we imagine we might be, from doing all that we long to do, from becoming what we hope to become passes away. And in our everyday lives we express this yearning in the energy and creativity we put into science and politics. The ways we seek to make the seemingly impossible, possible.

I've long questioned whether progress towards perfection at any cost is consistent with God's understanding of what it means for all to be completed. But in the past couple of years, I've begun to wonder whether completion, love perfected, also means that all pain and suffering and tears will disappear as if they were diseases to be eradicated. Tony McClelland is a Methodist Minister who had to retire when he was 49 because of a serious lung condition. He ponders what will be left of the lives of those "*who have been shaped decisively by the experience of pain or infirmity or impairment*" when suffering is wiped away. If living with these makes us who we are, he asks, will our identity be lost when all is finally finished? And yet, if the prospect of an end to it all is denied, are we accepting suffering as the final truth of some lives?

Our confusion is compounded by the way Western society understand medicine and health. Atal Gawande, a doctor and last years' Reith lecturer articulates our dilemma well. "*Being mortal is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology, within the limits set by our genes cells and flesh and bone. Medical science has given us remarkable power to push against these limits... But again and again,*" he says, "*I have seen the damage we in medicine do when we fail to acknowledge that such power is finite and always will be.*" He suggests we've misunderstood the purpose of medicine. For him, its job isn't to ensure health and survival at all costs, but to enable well-being. And I think seeking well-being in life is more consistent with fulfilment and completion, than the persistent, yet impossible human urge to remove all suffering. Among the sentences in Dag Hammarskjold's journal is this one. "*Do not seek death. Death will find you. But seek the road which makes death a*

*fulfilment.” “Seek the road which makes death a fulfilment.”* Isn't this what we are witnessing now? Jesus – the Word made flesh - travelled from the beginning, to this “it is finished”, knowing he would die a horrible death. Yet he didn't spend his time trying to prevent it - for he was a human being and we will all die - he embraced the deaths that gave him life – for love's sake. And it can be so for us. To arrive at the end of our lives having lived life well, to say “it is finished” isn't about living a wound, or suffering or pain-free life, because that's impossible. Instead, being human is about embracing our vulnerability and fragility, and seeking well-being within it. Donald Eadie lives with a long-term spinal condition. *“The miracle we most want,”* he says *“is to manage what at times feels like unmanageable and to become alive within what can be soul destroying.”*

For Tony McClelland, the fact that Christ's wounds are still present after his resurrection is important, but he also sees that they have become glorious. *“The one who wipes away the tears”*, he says, *“is the one in whom the marks of the wounds are mysteriously and gloriously still present.”* So completion, glory, fulfilment doesn't demand that we write *“off the truth of our lives...it is about placing that truth in the context of a deeper, greater truth.”* And this truth is that the *“surprising wholeness that we have grown into, and could only have grown into through suffering. That pain teaches us the truth of ourselves. And the process of learning that truth is simply what life is.”* Tony is, of course, talking from the perspective of what we will in the light of the resurrection. But the deeper truth of John's Gospel, is that when Jesus says “It is finished”, we are already seeing his glory. We see his suffering and death, his wounds, his resurrection and ascension, all at the same time. This is the fullness of love. As he completes, fulfils, and finishes his work he is glorified. And in his glory the wounds - not only of his suffering, but of all he has lived, all he has given, all he has received – remain. For in his wounded and glorified being we see the truth and glory of God – the fullest outpouring of God's love - who lives in, and witnesses to us through those, who will daily embrace this deeper and truthful mystery. Amen.

### **Prayer (based on a prayer by Donald Eadie)**

Let us pray.

Jesus,

in life and in death,

you invite us to enter the mystery

of being those who bear the marks of wounding

and becoming those whose lives carry rumours of transformation

In life and in death,

you invite us to live within the way

many will regard as sheer folly,

and yet is the way that leads to the heart of God.

You invite in life and in death

to walk with you until we can say “it is finished”.

It is complete.

All is fulfilled.

Amen.

## **SEVENTH WORD: 'FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT'**

Luke 23.44-46

Meditation on the seventh word - Jane Leach

This short passage contains one of the textual mysteries of the New Testament and the mystery concerns the cause of the darkness that Luke says covered the whole earth for three hours, for whilst the verb used to describe what happened to the sun is most often used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to mean 'fail'... it also means, eclipse.

During the partial eclipse that was almost visible from London a couple of weeks ago I was in America, but I do remember being in western Scotland on 11 August 1999 from where an almost total eclipse was visible for the first time in Britain since 1927. It was an eerie and unnatural experience: the birds stopped singing and the temperature dropped and the sky went black. It felt spooky; it felt weird; it felt quite frightening and it does not surprise me that such events were seen in ancient times as portents and signs of evil.

So why have translators of Luke's gospel avoided the term, 'eclipse'? and more dramatically why did some ancient scribes amend the Greek text to eliminate any suggestion of eclipse by using the verb, skotizein, to darken? Well, the reasons are scientific – there was no eclipse in Palestine around that date; and an eclipse cannot happen at Passover when there is full moon, but only when there is a new moon; and an eclipse can only last seconds and not hours. So scribes and theologians over the years have avoided the difficult and probably original text, and have even airbrushed it out to avoid the confrontation with scientists who since the time of Thucydides have known these things.

So what was Luke playing at? Is it simply that his eclipse is the equivalent of Matthew's earthquake? Is he making a theological point about darkness overcoming light at the moment of the death of God? Or is it more literature than history, Luke conflating his own experience of an eclipse visible in Greece and Asia Minor in AD 29, and associating it with Christ's death?

Or is it perhaps all of these...? a way of expressing the cosmic and existential meaning of this death. A death in which evil seems to triumph and the forces of darkness have their way and in which the light of faith goes out... like the lights that went out all over Europe; or the birds that stopped singing at Auschwitz; or perhaps like the horror of those lost eight minutes in a plane over the Alps in which time must have hung over the abyss.

And in such moments... when evil seems to triumph, or when our own death comes, what do we do? What will we do? How do we respond?

Until the moment comes we will not know. But Jesus, here in Luke's account, offers us a pattern for responding; a pathway to follow through death and disaster: first to cry out in a loud voice – of protest; of pain; of grief – and then to hand ourselves over, trusting that the

one who breathed life into us from the dust of the earth, will receive back that life into his hands and make it new again in ways we cannot now imagine.

Lord God

In the death of your son we see a man racked with pain as he is ripped from life.

And in that moment we fear that love may be eclipsed by violence and death.

As we listen to his cry of grief help us also to hear the temple curtain ripping

And the quiet handing over of his life into receiving hands.

Amen.