

# The Words on the Cross

## *A Meditation for Good Friday provided in The Hymnal, 1940*

Among the many Good Friday devotions centered upon the crucifixion of Christ, *The Words on the Cross*, or *The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*, occupy a small but special place in Anglican worship. This meditation takes us beyond *The Way of the Cross*, and beyond the *Veneration of the Cross*, to our Lord himself and to his own last words.

No single Gospel account provides us with all of his last words, but by ‘harmonizing’ the four accounts one comes to a total of seven statements made by our Lord. The symbolism of the number seven, the importance of Our Lord’s crucifixion and the profundity of his last words, altogether make these sayings irresistible as source for Christian meditation.

Of course the *Words* were not intended as pronouncements, but they were directed to persons close to our Lord, thus providing a web of personal interactions to be explored as well. The *Words* provide insight into our Lord’s suffering and the suffering of those whom he loved.

### The Words on the Cross *arranged in chronological order*

- I. Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. St. Luke xiii. 34
- II. Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. St. Luke xiii. 43
- III. Woman, behold thy son! Son, behold thy mother! St. John xix. 26, 27
- IV. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? St. Matt. xxvi. 46
- V. I thirst. St. John xix. 28
- VI. It is finished. St. John xix. 30
- VII. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. St. Luke xiii. 46

*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.* Our Lord prayed thus to his Father, craving pardon for his tormentors even as the lifeblood flowed from his wounds. This model of patience in suffering has ever been an inspiration to Christians, teaching us that we may bear with patience not only the suffering which we deserve, but that which we do not deserve as well. It is also the perfect illustration of our Lord’s teaching that we forgive our enemies. *Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.* These words were directed to the thief who was crucified along-

side our Lord, and are preceded by the formula of our Lord’s most important sayings (amen, I say unto you). Notwithstanding the crimes he had committed, the thief looked from his own cross to our Lord’s cross with repentance and humble faith, receiving remission of his sins and the promise of Heaven. *Woman, behold thy son! Son, behold thy mother!* These words show our Lord’s tender concern for those closest to him on earth, as he prepared to depart this world. In this statement, our Lord gave up his last earthly possession, the relation of a beloved son to his mother. By this act of generosity, Mary received a new son, and “the beloved disciple” received a new mother. *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* These words were quoted by our Lord from Psalm 22 in the Aramaic language, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” This is perhaps the darkest point of our Lord’s crucifixion and is the midway point of the *Seven Words*. It also reveals the gulf of separation that exists between God and sinful mankind. *I thirst.* In one of the ironies of the *Words*, the creator of water himself longs for a drink. Cecil Frances Alexander writes, “His are the thousand sparkling rills, that from a thousand fountains burst, and fill with music all the hills; and yet he saith, ‘I thirst.’” *It is finished.* This statement is often associated with the work of Salvation for mankind that was achieved in Christ’s atoning death upon the cross. It also means that the horror of the crucifixion is now over. *Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.* At the very end, our Lord entrusts himself to the hands of the Father. It is the hope of each Christian that we may also entrust ourselves to God’s keeping when we die.

Although the *Words on the Cross* are not nearly as well established in Christian devotional practice as the *Way of the Cross*, they have for many centuries been a subject for meditation by both Protestants and Catholics. A meditation was written by Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), Roman Cardinal, theologian and controversialist. The first major musical composer to use the *Words* was the Lutheran Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672), who composed a sacred oratorio for liturgical use on Good Friday.

Lacking the dramatic power of the Passion narrative, the *Words* never reached the status of the Passion in musical composition, although musical settings of the *Words* have been written by Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809) and Theodore Dubois (1837-1924). Haydn described an 18<sup>th</sup> century per-



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formance of the *Words* at the Roman Cathedral of Cadiz, Spain, as follows: “The walls, windows, and pillars of the church were hung with black cloth, and only one large lamp hanging from the center of the roof broke the solemn darkness. At midday, the doors were closed and the ceremony began. After a short service the bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced the first of the seven words (or sentences) and delivered a discourse thereon. This ended, he left the pulpit and fell to his knees before the altar. The interval was filled by music. The bishop then in like manner pronounced the second word, then the third, and so on, the orchestra following on the conclusion of each discourse.” (*letter to G. A. Griesinger, 1787*)



The Rev. Thomas Benson Pollock

The *Words* appeared in Anglican hymnody in 1861 with the publication of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, although they were probably not intended as a self-contained Service at the time. In the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* a verse of scripture was included as a sort of subtitle in italics above every hymn in the book. This led the worshipper back to Holy Scripture for the material which had been the inspiration for the hymn or which was quoted by the hymn. In later editions the scripture subtitles were generally omitted, except in the case of *The Words from the Cross*, where they were retained, and then began to be augmented with titles, “The First Word”, “The Second Word” and so forth, as though part of a Structured Meditation or even a Service. The anglo-catholic missionary priest of Birmingham, Thomas Benson Pollock, wrote a set of hymns on *The Words on the Cross*, which appeared in his *Litanies for Special Services and General Use* of 1870. Pollock’s seven hymns entered the hymnal of the American Church in 1892, and continued through *The Hymnal, 1940* (No. 82). There are two tunes provided for his hymns, both appropriately in a minor key: “Swedish Litany” is a 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran Chorale; the second tune, “Ton-mân” (composed in 1912), is laced with a generous helping of tri-tones that help give the music an appropriate sense of urgency and pathos. The poetic meter of Fr. Pollock’s hymns is 77.76., a form that appears in only one other place in our hymnal, the *Litanies* (Nos. 229-234). This little used litanic form consists of three lines of 7 syllables to be sung by the choir or cantor, followed by one line of 6 syllables for the congregational response. At the end of each stanza of Pollock’s hymn, the response of the congregation is “Hear us, holy Jesus”.

Another set of hymns for *The Words from the Cross* is suggested by *The Hymnal 1940 Companion*, as follows:

Prelude – no. 74 – O come and mourn with me  
Continued from page 14  
awhile

I – no. 71 – Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou  
offended

II – no. 342 – Jesus, Name all names above  
III – no. 76 – At the cross her station keeping  
IV – no. 73 – O thou, who through this holy  
week  
V – no. 77 – His are the thousand sparkling  
rills  
VI – no. 78 – It is finished! Christ hath known  
VII – no. 79 – When our heads are bowed with  
woe

This particular set of hymns is based on the hymn sequence from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, and retains three hymns from that sequence: *O, Come and Mourn, At the cross her station keeping* and *His are the thousand sparkling rills*.

The question remains of how one is to go about constructing a complete Service today with only *The Words on the Cross* and a set of hymns. The Service used to be quite common and various well-established forms of Service abounded, but having now fallen into disuse it is difficult to find resources from Anglican publishers. Those who are fortunate will have access to a form of Service from longer ago. One Service that came across my desk is the “Service of Meditation and Devotion for Good Friday” compiled by the Rt. Rev. William R. Moody (Bishop of Lexington, Kentucky) and published by Morehouse in 1939/1967. It is constructed with yet another round of hymns from *The Hymnal, 1940*, and has quite an extensive system of Collects and Suffrages.

Fortunately it would not be very difficult for a parish priest to construct a good Service around *The Words on the Cross* from *The Hymnal, 1940* in consultation with his diocesan ordinary. A very basic form of the Service would likely consist of the *Words*, the Hymns, a series of Meditations offered by the priest, and appropriate Collects from the Book of Common Prayer, especially drawing upon the Collects of Passiontide, Palm Sunday and Holy Week. The congregation would gather at midday on Good Friday, the Church having been prepared by veiling of the crosses and stripping of the altar, according to local or diocesan custom. The priest would read each *Word*, offering a brief, reflective homily and a time of silent meditation. The silence would be concluded by a Collect or Collects from the Book of Common Prayer, and the singing of a corresponding hymn. When singing the hymns of Thomas Benson Pollock, the choir or the cantor will sing the first three lines of each stanza, with the congregation joining in on the response. When an alternate set of hymns is used, such as that suggested in the *Hymnal Companion*, the hymns could be sung by choir and congregation together. A Service of *The Words on the Cross* could also be used in conjunction with other devotional Services, such as *The Office of Tenebrae* (see *Holy Week Offices*, ed. Massey Shepherd, Seabury Press, 1958).

# Explaining Infant Baptism

## *through the use of two analogies*

The first is based on the early life of King Henry VI of England, Ireland and France. He was crowned at the age of less than one year at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. He made his vows by proxy. This was because he was king by birth and his coronation confirmed him to be what he was born to be. That is, he really was king, though not aware of it and though he gave no actual consent himself. Then he was brought up as king (regrettably not too successfully) and consciously took kingship upon him. He could have abdicated, though this option was rarely taken by medieval kings, and he often lamented his hard calling. Henry was nevertheless aware that he had been made king (by God, he thought) and that his duty was to accept what had been done. Likewise, the child of Christian parents is baptized as an Infant to be what God wills him to be. He is brought up as a Christian and on reaching maturity personally affirms and accepts who he is before God.

The second analogy is based on the legal concept of escrow in English law. In North America lawyers commonly talk of holding funds “in escrow”, but that is not the English use, in which an escrow is a writing sealed and delivered by the first party to a third party to be held by him until certain conditions are performed, and then to be delivered by him to the other (the second) party to take effect as a deed. If the condition is performed, then the delivered deed takes effect from the original execution and delivery of the deed to the third party, not from the date of delivery to the second party following performance of the condition. In other words, the effect of the deed relates back.

Here from the pen of Dr. H.C.G. Moule, Bishop of Durham (1899-1922), is an explanation of Infant Baptism using the analogy of escrow from English law:

Christian Baptism is an ordinance of the New Covenant. It is an ordinance of entrance into Covenant. It initiates the receiver of it into the new, better, and everlasting Covenant. It does this after the manner of a rite. It does it formally—ceremonially. It gives new birth, new life, forgiveness, the Spirit, grace and glory. But it gives as a deed gives—not as an electric wire gives. It gives a title. It conveys to the right recipient such possession as now after conveyance only demands his actual entering in and using to be complete.



There are legal documents called escrows. These are deeds of conveyance which speak in the present tense, and do a present act of gift and transfer, but they carry with them a condition to be fulfilled before the effect is actualized. Till that condition is fulfilled the present giving does not become actual possession. The receiver of the title-deed does not actually enter on the property given in it. He has it in title, but he has it not yet in

act and use. He has something at once. He received a beneficial title, right and pledge, the possession of which conceivably at once entitles him to special care, attention, and privileges.

So Baptism, at once and literally, in the sense of title, makes an infant a member of the Church—a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the sense of title, he is at once regenerate. He receives at once in that respect the acceptance of an adopted child of God in Christ, and the new life, which is wrought in man by the Holy Ghost. But in the ordinary law of God's working revealed in His Word, these precious things, in their possession, await the humble claim of repentance and faith. So the infant who in Sacramental title is born again, still needs to be born again. He is baptismally regenerated, but he needs subsequently to be actually regenerated by Faith and Repentance.”

[provided by Charles Neil and J.M. Willoughby, *The Tutorial Prayer Book*, London 1913, p 375, but no precise source is given.]

It is easy to see why Bishop Moule wrote as he did, referring to a deed giving title, and to subsequent entry and use. His explanation proclaims that in the Sacrament God has freely given everything needful for both eternal salvation and sanctification to the Infant Child of Christian believers; it also assumes that (a) Godparents will do their holy work of making sure that the growing child is given Christian nurture and instruction; (b) the child is surrounded by the worship, prayer and means of grace of the Church of God; and (c) the maturing child, as a young person, will personally embrace the Gospel in repentance and faith and enjoy that which has been his by divine gift from the beginning.

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