**Jesus’ Last Words**

**Good Friday 2020**

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What were the last words that Jesus uttered as he died on the cross? It depends on which gospel you read. Matthew and Mark both show Jesus crying out in anguish: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Luke, by contrast, shows Jesus serenely offering up his life, saying: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” John, as usual, has a unique perspective, since he is far more interested in the theological truth of Jesus’ divinity than in the historical details of his life. It is not surprising, then, that John portrays Jesus as simply declaring: “It is finished.”

The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the “synoptic” gospels because they present a fairly consistent view of Jesus and his ministry. Yet, even their narratives have this glaring disparity at the most crucial time of all – the moment of Jesus’ death. Were Jesus’ last words a plaintive cry of abandonment or a confident relinquishing of his spirit to a Father who seemed very close? We will never know for certain. However, there is a more important question to consider, for it bears directly on our own experience of God: “How could *both* of those exclamations from the cross be true expressions of Jesus’ state of mind at the moment of his death?”

No matter which gospel you choose to read, you can’t help but notice the extraordinary intimacy between Jesus and his Heavenly Father. In John, Jesus actually says, “The Father and I are one.” The other three gospels demonstrate that intimacy in other ways, without putting those exact words in Jesus’ mouth. For example, think of the Father’s voice which speaks from a cloud at Jesus’ baptism, and again at his Transfiguration. Both times, the Father declares unequivocally, “This is *my beloved Son*.” Also recall the times when Jesus spends *entire nights* in prayer, maintaining intimate communion with his Father for hours on end. And, let’s not forget Jesus’ agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he clearly expresses his horror at the death that awaits him, yet just as clearly expresses his knowledge of the Father’s will and his absolute determination to follow it. The gospels leave no doubt that Jesus and the Father are one, and that Jesus *knew* in his heart that his Father was always very close to him. Hence, it makes perfect sense that his final words on the cross could have been, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

At the moment of death, Jesus surely knew that the time had come to hand over his spirit to the Father, who was one with him at all times. But, how did it *feel* for him to hang on that cross – betrayed, beaten, humiliated, tortured, and dying in absolute agony? How could any human being in those circumstances *not* feel abandoned and alone? No matter what Jesus knew in his mind and in his heart, I believe that his *feelings* at that moment were most accurately captured by the desperate cry, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

So, which is the truth? Did Jesus have total confidence in his Father’s constant love, or did he feel abandoned in his suffering? I think the answer is, “Yes.” Faith and feelings operate at different levels within the human person, and it is not at all unusual for them to be at odds with one another. We know this from our own experience. Sometimes, when we feel God’s absence, we can start to panic, fearing that we might be losing our faith. In reality, if we had actually lost our faith, then a feeling of God’s absence would not perturb us so much. It is the awful dissonance between our faith and our feelings that is so upsetting. We *know* by faith that God loves us, and that God is close to us and attentive to us at all times, but we *just can’t feel it* all the time. That’s okay. Jesus felt the same way on the cross. What we are experiencing in those moments is not necessarily a lack of faith, but the reality of our human weakness. We are physical, emotional and spiritual beings, all at once. And sometimes that complicated mix that makes us human leaves us quite confused, believing one thing and feeling its opposite at the same time. That is cause not for panic, but for patience and prayerful reflection.

As we meditate on Jesus’ Passion this Good Friday, we should keep in mind that he was a real human being, who experienced pain and suffering in much the same way that we do, even though he shared a uniquely intimate relationship with the Father. And, as we meditate on the pain, suffering and confusion of our own lives, we should remember that our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ has made us beloved children of that same Heavenly Father. Like Jesus on the cross, let us embrace both our human weakness *and* our communion with the Father.