

MEDITATIONS ON CHRIST'S WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Good Friday 7:30 pm Sermon – April 10, 2009

By Pastor Vern Oestmann

* Meditation on the First Word

"They do not know what they are doing"
They do not know? They ...who killed Jesus?
Who is "they"?
It is so easy to name others
to blame others
the Romans
the crowd
Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas
they all played their part
and conspired against Jesus
or simply followed orders to maintain the peace
to keep Jesus' kingdom from infringing on theirs.
And yet where are we when Jesus' kingdom infringes on ours?
on our peace and our order?
on our prosperity and our security?
Where are we when the victims of our peace cry for justice?
when those disenfranchised by our order call for compassion?
when the hungry and the lonely beg us to share our prosperity
our security
our power?
Where are we when Christ is crucified among us?
Surely he should have raged
at the sinners who nailed him to the tree.
Surely he should have raged at us for the evil we do,
the evil we do both knowing and unknowing,
Yet compassion is there in the first words that he utters
He intercedes for us before the Father.
Compassion that called him into being in his mother's womb
Compassion that compelled him to the cross
Compassion that brings incredible, unbelievable grace
Compassion that echoes through the centuries
to all who participate in the killing of Christ:
Compassion that cries out from the cross:
"Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing"

* Meditation on The Second Word

How much are we like the first thief?
Full of anger - because we are not rescued from our sin?
Full of hate - because we suffer because of the sins of others?
How much do we want God to snap his fingers
And make right what we have made wrong?
What we have allowed others to make wrong?

How easy it is to cry "save us"
and to rail against God
when there is no magic cure
no miraculous recovery
no legions of angels
to take away pain and bring wholeness.

How easy it is to scorn the Messiah,
to mock the goodness of the world
and condemn the light of the world
because we are unwilling to face what we have done?

Yet there is goodness
There is a cure for sin
a cure that does not promise magical solutions
but promises that the pain of sin is not the end,
that when all this is over
when the suffering is finished
that the final word is not torture and defeat
but life -- life springing out of the ashes
life transformed and fulfilled in Paradise.

To the compassionate thief
To the one who could still recognize the good in the world
To the one who tried to comfort and protect that good
To the one who sought good -- Comfort was given
"Today, you will be in paradise with me."

*** Meditation on the Third Word**

Who can grasp the grief?
the grief of Mary watching her son suffer?
the grief of Mary watching him die?

And who can grasp the grief of the son?
The son who must see his mother mourn?

What gift can a man give his mother?
What can he offer when he is gone?
How can he help her?
Hold her?
Comfort her?
Honor her?

"Woman, here is your son"

Here is one I love, to love you, and for you to love.
One who knows me
One who is my brother and who can speak of me.
One Who can hold you,
 comfort you,
 and honor you;
One who shares your grief

"Here is your mother"

Here is one I love, for you to love, and to love you.
The one who taught me,
the one who fed me,
the one who wiped away my tears
the one who hugged me,
the one who grieves with you.

Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.

*** Meditation on the Fourth Word**

Of all the agony of that tortuous day
the lacerations of the scourging
the chafing of the thorns around his head
the convulsions of his tormented, dehydrated body
as it hung in the heat all the day
Nothing reaches the depth of this anguished cry of desolation
 "My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Jesus, who found his purpose and strength in the presence of God
who was sustained by the immediacy of his relationship with God
and who endured all by the tangible power of God always at work
within him ,
always a centre of vitality and peace,
found himself totally alone on the cross.

Jesus, whose very being was God,
found himself utterly,
 absolutely,
 despairingly.
cut off from all that gives life and breath
cut off from all that gives purpose and hope
cut off from the source of his being
cut off, even from himself
plumbing the depths of the human condition
to walk in the place of the utter absence of God,
in the place of sinners
in the place of those who reject God.

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

In these words is the central mystery of the crucifixion
which cannot be fully comprehended,
that there is no despair so deep
or evil so overwhelming
or place so far removed from joy, light, and love
from the very heart of God
that God has not been before us,
and where God cannot meet us
and bring us home.

*** Meditation on the Fifth Word**

There is a kind of timelessness about hanging on a cross.
It is not a quiet death,
over in an instant in one glorious moment of martyrdom
like being torn apart by lions.
A cross is as much an instrument of torture
as it is a gallows from which to hang,

And as the day wears on
seconds stretch into minutes which stretch into hours
until there comes a point when time can no longer be measured
except in the gradual weakening of the body
and its ever more insistent demands
for that substance which is so vital to life
so foundational to all living things
so basic to existence as we know it: -- water.

Water to moisten a parched mouth
Water to free a swollen tongue
Water to open a rasping throat that cannot gasp enough air.
Water to keep hope alive
to keep life alive just a few moments longer.
Water, to a crucified man, is life.

"O God, thou art my God, I seek thee,
my soul thirsts for thee;
my flesh faints for thee
as in a dry and weary land where no water is."

Who can tell if these words from Psalm 63 went through Jesus mind
but a thirst for water is a thirst for life
and a thirst for life is a thirst for God
who promises streams in the desert
mighty rivers in the dry land
and living water to wash away every tear.

Here, at the end of it all those promises seem far away, -
distant. And yet Jesus - forsaken by God
still clings to the memory and the hope of life.

"I thirst."

*** Meditation on the Sixth Word**

What a sigh of relief!
What a cry of deliverance,
that finally,
after seemingly endless pain
and gasping torment,
it is over at last.
The suffering is ended.
The ordeal is finished
and nothing remains
but the blessed peace of the absence of all sensation.

When all there is, is pain
its ceasing is the greatest blessing of all
even when its ceasing comes only with death.

But Jesus' cry is more than just welcoming the ending of pain
it is more than joy at the deliverance death brings.

He does not merely say, "it is over"
he says, "it is accomplished,
fulfilled,
achieved"

Jesus' cry isn't a cry of defeat and despair

It is a cry of success and triumph
- even at the moment of death -
that the race has been run
that he has endured to the end
that the strife is over
and the battle is won.

Jesus' cry is a cry of relief to be sure
but it is also a cry of victory:

"The work I came to do is complete"
there is nothing more to add
"it is finished"

*** Meditation on the Seventh Word**

It is the end, the very end
the end of the ordeal
the end of the suffering
and Jesus alone on the cross
tortured, exhausted, abandoned by his friends
forsaken by God
gasps for a last breath
and gathers the strength for one final cry.

Why would he choose to speak
so close to the end?
Why would he muster the last energy he had
to cry out with a loud voice?
Couldn't God have heard his thoughts?

Unless God wasn't the only one intended to hear.
Unless his voice was pitched loud
so that we too might hear this final dedication of his soul.

A dedication made despite the pain,
despite the mocking,
despite the agony,
despite the sense of horrible aloneness he felt.

A dedication made to God
before the resurrection,
before the victory of the kingdom,
before any assurance other than that
which faith could bring.

Jesus entrusts his spirit -- his life --
and all that has given it meaning --
to God in faith,
even at the point of his own abandonment
when the good seems so very far away
he proclaims his faith in God,
the darkness cannot overcome it.

"Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit"