

THE FIRST WORD

When they came to the place called "The Skull", they nailed Jesus to the cross there, and the two criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

Jesus said "Forgive them, Abba! They do not know what they are doing."

"They do not know what they are doing"

They do not know? They ...who killed Jesus?

Who are "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

and 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 oppressors 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 God.

Compassion that called him into being in his mother's womb

Compassion that compelled him to share our life all the way through to death

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:

"Abba, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing"

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,

that we might die and live as one with God.

THE SECOND WORD

One of the criminals hanging there threw insults at him:
"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"
The other one, however, rebuked him, saying: "Don't you fear God?
Here we are all under the same sentence. Ours, however, is only right,
for we are getting what we deserve for what we did;
but he has done no wrong." And he said to Jesus,
"Remember me, Jesus, when you come as King!"
Jesus said to him, "I tell you this: Today you will be in Paradise with me."

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 the divine 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 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."

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,
that we might die and live as one with God.

THE THIRD WORD

Standing close to Jesus' cross were his mother,
his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.
Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there;
so he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."
Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother."
And from that time the disciple took her to live in his home.

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.

Women, behold your children; children, behold your mothers.

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,
that we might die and live as one with God.

THE FOURTH WORD

And when the sixth hour had come,
there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.
And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice,
"Elo-i, elo-i, lama sabach-thani?" which means,
"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

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 center of vitality and peace,
felt himself totally alone on the cross.

Jesus, whose very being was God,
felt 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.

"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.

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,
that we might die and live as one with God.

THE FIFTH WORD

After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished,
said (to fulfill the scripture), "I thirst."

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 the psalmist's 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 – bereft of the presence of God –
still clings to the memory and the hope of life.

"I thirst."

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,
that we might die and live as one with God.

THE SIXTH WORD

A bowl was there, full of cheap wine mixed with vinegar,
so they soaked a sponge in it, put on stick of hyssop and lifted it up to his lips.
When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished";

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,
more than joy at the deliverance death brings.

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

His cry is not 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 shown us how to live fully and love extravagantly to the end
that finally the separation between God and humanity has been reconciled
and a new creation is possible.

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"

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,
that we might die and live as one with God.

THE SEVENTH WORD

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,
"Abba, into your hands I commit my spirit!"
And having said this he breathed his last.

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
bereft of the presence of 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 waste the last energy he had to cry aloud?
Couldn't God have heard his thoughts?

Unless God wasn't the only audience.
Unless we were meant to hear this final dedication of his soul.

A dedication made despite the pain,
despite the mocking,
despite the agony,
despite the sense of horrible abandonment 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 when the good seems so very far away
he proclaims his faith in God,
and the darkness cannot overcome it.

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

Jesus, you lived and died as one of us,
that we might die and live as one with God.