The Seven Last Words from the Cross

### A Good Friday Sequence of Devotions and Music

*By Revd Stephen Froggatt (Timings approximate)*

*Music as we gather in silence*

*Haydn: Seven Last Words (‘Introduzione 1’ and ‘Vater, Vergib Ihnen’) 10:15*

1400

**The First Word** ‘Forgiveness’

Father forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)

1405

**The Second Word** ‘Salvation’

Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43)

*Interlude - Poor Clare Sisters of Arundel (‘In Paradisum’) 1:40*

1415

**The Third Word** ‘Relationship’

Woman, behold thy son! (John 19:26-27)

1420

**The Fourth Word** ‘Abandonment’

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)

*Interlude - Paul Carr: Seven Last Words (‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’) 4:24*

1430

**The Fifth Word** ‘Distress’

*I thirst.* (John 19:28)

1435

**The Sixth Wor**d ‘Triumph’

It is finished. (John 19:30)

*Interlude - Stainer: Crucifixion (‘God So Loved The World’) 3:37*

1450

**The Seventh Word** ‘Reunion’

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. (Luke 23:46)

1500

*Music as we leave in silence*

*‘O Sacred Head Sore Wounded’ - violin solo*

## The First Word ‘Forgiveness’

1400 *Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.* (Luke 23:34)

Father, forgive them - Even on the cross, Jesus continues to teach and to set the perfect example of love. Father forgive them - Jesus repeats the words from the Lord’s prayer even with his last and anguished breath. Father, forgive them - Grace and mercy are to be shown even to those who crucified the Saviour.

In the Old Testament, the understanding of sin was such that it was a weight taken on by the wrongdoer, until released from it by the forgiveness of the offended party. We can appreciate this more if we understand our sin as a burden too great to bear, making us unable to function properly under the heavy load.

With this in mind, we can re-read Jesus’ words in Matthew 11,

*Come unto me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

We start to understand the idea that Jesus willingly takes our sins upon him, and carries them as a great burden to the cross. As the cross becomes a metaphor for our sins, we observe that the weight of the cross is so great that Jesus stumbles and falls as he carries it. Yet still he carries on, picking himself up and once more shouldering the great weight of the cross for us.

Now we are ready to read those prophetic words in Isaiah 53,

*Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.*

When we gaze at Christ on the cross, we need an understanding of Christ taking upon himself the sins of the world - ours too - and that this burden is willingly borne on his shoulders. As Graham Kendrick so poetically writes,

*My heavy load he chose to bear.*

Now return to the Lord’s prayer, and in particular these words,

*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

Jesus’ core teaching is so perfectly wrapped up in this great prayer, and these lines go right to the heart of it.

As Jesus prays for the forgiveness of those who sin against him by crucifying him, so implicitly is he praying for God to forgive the sins he is carrying himself - the burden of sin that is rightly ours.

We hear the words of Jesus on the cross, confident that his own prayer was answered, and then we realise that in doing so our own sins are forgiven as well.

In these words then, our first Word From The Cross in our sequence, we call to mind both the Old Testament understanding of the burden of sin, and the New Testament understanding of forgiveness being a reciprocal understanding as seen in the Lord’s Prayer. These aren’t the only pictures that we could call to mind, however.

A more challenging concept is the idea of sacrifice for forgiveness, particularly if we try to hold such a sacrifice tightly within our Trinitarian understanding of God. Surely, God sending himself to sacrifice himself to himself to save us from himself is a bit much for any logical person! We can easily tie ourselves into knots.

The well-known atheist Richard Dawkins complains in these words,

*The idea that God could only forgive our sins by having his son tortured to death as a scapegoat is surely, from an objective point of view, a deeply unpleasant idea. If God wanted to forgive us our sins, why didn't he just forgive them? Why did he have to have his son tortured?*

I find the response more satisfying in the context not of torture but of self-giving; not of sacrifice but of forgiveness: as Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his executioners, so the burden of our sins is also forgiven. In other words, I would respond to Dawkins that God DOES forgive our sins, and we are called to forgive others in the same way.

Finally in this Word, Jesus says ‘They do not know what they are doing’. Not knowing and not seeing are synonymous, especially in the Gospels. These people cannot see. Jesus has wept over their blindness on the way to Jerusalem. One of the core focuses of Jesus’ manifesto in Luke 4, was helping the blind to see:

 *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

 *because he has anointed me*

 *to bring good news to the poor.*

 *He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

 *and recovery of sight to the blind,*

 *to let the oppressed go free,*

 *to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

Jesus’ prayer, then, is not only that his executioners be forgiven, but also that their eyes be opened to God’s mercy, grace and love.

## The Second Word ‘Salvation’

1405 *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.* (Luke 23:43)

There is no punctuation in the Greek New Testament from which our Gospels are translated. However, the placement of a comma in this verse has unfortunately caused a great deal of unnecessary controversy. We are familiar with the traditional rendition, but the original could also be translated like this:

*Truly, truly I say to you today: you will be with me in paradise.*

So which is correct? Is there a way to understand the text such that yet another meaning can be found? Or can we attempt the unthinkable, and suggest that all meanings are consistent?

As it turns out, it’s the latter. The hinge is our limited understanding of ‘paradise’, and indeed our limited understanding of ‘today’, strange though that sounds.

Before we begin, let us look at the context of this Word from the cross. The thieves on either side of Jesus, crucified with him, are traditionally named as Gestas and Dismas (from apocryphal texts not included in the Bible). Gestas was on Jesus’ left and Dismas was on Jesus’ right. Gestas was the one who kept jeering at Jesus, while Dismas was the one who repeatedly called on Jesus to remember him when Jesus came as King. It was to Dismas that Jesus spoke these words.

Already our mind is making connections to Matthew 25, with the sheep on Jesus’ right hand side being commended for their unknowing acts of love and mercy to strangers, and the goats on Jesus’ left being condemned for the selfishness and greed. Dismas was on Jesus’ right hand side, as were those sheep.

Remember that every word in every Gospel was written not as it happened, but long after the Resurrection. Each writer assembled his material to suit his audience and the emphases he wished to make. Thus Luke writes these words to Dismas at the end of his Gospel, no doubt with other important words of Jesus still in his mind. The last time Luke uses the word ‘today’ is here in Luke 23. The first time he uses the same word, it is in Luke 4, the Jesus manifesto mentioned earlier:

*Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Today, then, is the new ongoing present. It is the timeless new day of the Kingdom of God. The writer to the Hebrews hinted at this in Chapter 13,

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

Similarly, Paul, writing to the Corinthians, put it like this:

*“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”*

*2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)*

The New Testament Scholar Tom Wright draws our attention to the significance of the garden of that early Easter morning. Christ the second Adam has defeated death and God’s re-creation of the world is announced. The ladies rushing to the tomb at dawn have become the second Eve. The garden itself is the new Eden - the new paradise garden, but this time all humankind are invited to live together in love and harmony, literally a heaven on earth.

This paradise is what we understand by the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. When God reigns, every day is part of that same new timeless present.

So when Jesus reassures the penitent thief with these words of paradise, we can hear the same words for ourselves.

**Interlude - Poor Clare Sisters of Arundel (‘In Paradisum’) 1:40**

## The Third Word ‘Relationship’

1415 *Woman, behold thy son!* (John 19:26-27)

Our modern ears jar slightly when we hear Jesus addressing his own mother as ‘Woman’, both here and back in that first miracle at the wedding at Cana,

*Woman, my hour is not yet come.*

Yet this was an endearing form of address at the time, and so we need to hear the love in this word. With these words from the cross, Jesus is caring for his own mother and preparing her for his death.

‘Woman, behold your son’ to his mother, then ‘Behold your mother’ to the beloved disciple, who was commonly thought to be John, the author of the Gospel.

Then suddenly we realise that a contract has been spoken. A reciprocal covenant has been made. These words are binding and legal - just as binding and legal as any marriage vows:

*I, the man, take you to be my wife…*

*I, the woman, take you to be my husband…*

The words of contract have been spoken, and these words have been spoken in the presence of witnesses. From this moment on, Mary is John’s mother and John is Mary’s son. Jesus has given his mother a son to replace him after his own death, to look after her and care for her. Jesus has similarly given John a mother to love him and care for him in the devastating moments after Jesus’ death.

If a Christian community is known by its kindness to each other then it has understood what these words from the cross are all about. The word ‘kindness’ has at its root the word ‘kin’, meaning family. Mary and the Beloved Disciple are now legally a family unit. A Christian church community which embodies that same family-ness, or kin-dness, is declaring that the members are related as Brother and Sister. All monastic communities know this through the monks’ references to each other as Brother. Similarly in the Convents, the Nuns refer to each other as Sister. Very often, the vows pronounced on full entrance to that community mark the adoption of a new name. My name may be Stephen now, but if I entered a monastic community, I might take on the new name Brother James or Brother Thomas. In the same way Jorge Mario Bergoglio took on the new name Brother Francis - when he became the current Pope.

For most of us, it is our Baptism which marks our new identity into the family of God. At our baptism we are born again into God’s family, with God himself as our Father. What’s more, it is God in love who declares us to be co-heirs with Christ, for we too are children of God.

## The Fourth Word ‘Abandonment’

1420 *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)

Much of the crucifixion narrative is set out to embody the words of Psalm 22 from which this quote is taken.

Psalm 22 is a lament. This heart-wrenching cry of desolation is its opening line. Jesus frequently quoted the Psalms and would have known them by heart as did all Rabbis from his time. However, this time Jesus is doing more than quoting Psalm 22 - he is claiming it as his own.

The laments were particularly used in situations where the author felt that God was remote. Perhaps the enemy seemed to be gaining the upper hand, or perhaps in the depths of a depressive episode, the Psalmist felt so down that he couldn’t even sense God’s presence within him.

Here Jesus is crying out these words because after years of regularly praying to the Father, even in the bitter tear-soaked prayer of Gethsemane, now Jesus feels like that connection has gone.

Some suggest that it was at this point that Jesus became fully aware of the burden of the sin he was carrying. Perhaps it was at this point that he felt himself to be most vulnerably human. I can’t accept the simplistic idea that God somehow ‘looked away’ or ‘turned his face aside’ - I prefer Moltmann’s understanding that God himself was suffering there. As he writes,

*When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross also enters into the situation of man's godforsakenness. In Jesus he does not die the natural death of a finite being, but the violent death of the criminal on the cross, the death of complete abandonment by God.*

We start to understand this when we read in Philippians 2 that Jesus

*emptied himself, .. becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.*

So did Jesus empty himself of all that was God in order to become fully human, or did he empty himself of all that was human in order to be fully God, dying for us on the cross? Perhaps there is no simple answer, but rather that we have to work hard with our theology if is to be deep enough to tackle such profound mysteries.

Putting this Fourth Word from the Cross back into its context we turn again to Psalm 22, only to find that it has already been quoted:

 *But I am a worm, and not human;*

 *scorned by others, and despised by the people.*

 *All who see me mock at me;*

 *they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;*

 *“Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—*

 *let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”*

The Roman soldiers and the passers-by have already been mocking Jesus. As have the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. Thirdly, the two bandits on either side of him, even though the one on his right does eventually change his tune when he recognises who Jesus is. Later we shall see that the Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothing, a detail specifically mentioned in the same Psalm, and a detail attested by all four Gospels.

Significantly, in both Matthew and Mark, this Word from the cross is marked by the reference to the sky turning black. This powerfully reinforces the sense of abandonment. We are taken back to the very opening of Genesis, when the world was chaos and darkness and emptiness. We are waiting for God to speak again the words that will re-set the earth, the words of calling forth Light and Life. We know, of course, that these words will be spoken metaphorically by the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day, as the world’s new Light and Life break out of the darkness of the stone cold tomb.

Many people find an easy parallel between the overwhelming darkness and the forces of evil. Song writer Sidney Carter writes of this scene, for example,

*I danced in the morning when the sky turned black*

*It’s hard to dance when the devil’s on your back*

I find it enough to think of Jesus the Light of the World - the light that flooded into the lives of so many people living in the darkness of the margins of society; the light that brought so much hope into the darkness of people’s despair - as Jesus hangs dying on the cross, that light is darkened as Jesus is consumed by sin and death. Yet that light will shine again, and once Easter Day dawns, it can never again be extinguished.

**Interlude - Paul Carr: Seven Last Words (‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’) 4:24**

## The Fifth Word ‘Distress’

1430 *I thirst.* (John 19:28)

The Bible begins and ends with the Water of Life - flowing out of the Garden of Eden, and meandering through a multitude of passages in the Old and New Testaments, until we find its true source in the new Jerusalem, the Heaven-on-Earth described in the Book of Revelation.

As Jesus cries out, I thirst, we are taken back to any one of these passages, but notably, perhaps, the cries of the wandering Israelites as they complain bitterly to Moses in Exodus 17,

*But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”*

This is a significant choice, because God responds through Moses at Horeb, commanding Moses to strike the rock with his staff so that water might flow out and quench the thirst of the people. It takes the genius of poet George Hugh Bourne to make this parallel with Jesus on the cross, in his hymn Lord Enthroned in Heavenly Splendour:

*5 Life-imparting, heavenly Manna,*

 *stricken Rock with streaming side,*

 *heaven and earth with loud hosanna*

 *worship thee, the Lamb who died.*

The stricken rock with streaming side is of course the body of Jesus, struck with the centurion’s spear after Jesus’ death, and we have John’s Gospel providing the post-mortem detail that blood and water flowed out from Jesus’ side.

Yet this was the Jesus, who in his lifetime, offered living water to all those who thirst. Referring to the provision of bread and water in the desert for the Israelites, Jesus now says,

*“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

And again,

*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”*

When he was sitting at the well, he spoke to the woman of Samaria,

*Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”*

This was the same Jesus, whose power over water included calming the storm and turning water into wine. Yet now, vulnerable and close to death, it is Jesus who is crying out for water, once more fulfilling the words of Psalm 22,

 *I am poured out like water,*

 *and all my bones are out of joint;*

 *my heart is like wax;*

 *it is melted within my breast;*

 *my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,*

 *and my tongue sticks to my jaws;*

 *you lay me in the dust of death.*

The distress is real. We need to remember that ‘Passion’ means suffering. These final moments are almost too harrowing to watch, as Jesus hangs on the cross, exhausted, weak, barely able to breathe and so parched he can hardly speak.

We have to avert our gaze.

## The Sixth Word ‘Triumph’

1435 *It is finished.* (John 19:30)

On some Communion tables around the world, are inscribed the words of Jesus from the Institution of the Last Supper,

*This do in remembrance of me*

The word order seems a little strange to our modern ears, but this is the way the line was phrased in the King James Version of Luke 22.

On other Communion tables, church furniture and even Christian tattoos, the inscription bears the single word,

*Tetelestai*

This is the Sixth word - ‘It is finished’. The very reason why we can gather around that Communion table in the first place.

The word itself can be translated in a variety of ways. Grammatically it implies a past action with an ongoing effect, and so can also be rendered as “Paid in full” - the word that might be stamped on a Greek hotel bill when checking out, for example. All debts paid and no outstanding balance. Free to go.

We saw earlier that the notion of sin is sometimes understood as a burden, a heavy load that must be removed by forgiveness. Another way to look at sin is as a debt which must be paid. Indeed, one version of the Lord’s prayer includes the line,

*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

Thus the cry of Tetelestai, or It Is Finished, is a cry of triumph that the burden of sin has been completely lifted, the debt of sin has been paid in full, and the saving, redeeming work of Jesus has therefore been completed.

Have you ever asked for the bill in a restaurant only to be told that another table has anonymously paid for your entire meal, and that they left a short while ago? Wouldn’t that be amazing? Wouldn’t it be even more amazing if you could be that person randomly paying the bill for a family of complete strangers and not even waiting to see their reaction? Unlike the watch-me-give-to-charity beloved of social media, this ticks the box for Jesus’ teaching on giving in secret. Just a thought to put out there. If you did this in Greece, you would even be presenting a family with their bill over which the word ‘Tetelestai’ - Paid in full - was used to cross it through. We can start to understand the impact of the word.

When Jesus said “It is finished” he did not mean it in the sense of exhaustion - I’m completely finished and can’t go on. He meant it in that triumphant sense of having crossed the finishing line and won the race. This was the race that Satan never wanted Jesus to run - indeed he tried to dissuade Jesus from heading for the cross even at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he spent those long days in the wilderness. Yet even then, Jesus knew that the way to the cross was one way. He came close to doubting it all only in the depth of his Gethsemane anguish when he prayed as in this verse from Mark 14,

*He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”*

After which he knew that his work would not be accomplished until he had surrendered everything, even to the point of death on the cross.

As the old preachers used to say,

*The greatest moment in human history was not when man walked on the moon, but when God walked on the earth.*

At this point on the Cross, the work is now done. God as man in Jesus has accomplished all that he was born to achieve. We can even make the connection with the prophesy in Isaiah 56, remembering that according to John 1, Jesus is the very Word of God:

 *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;*

 *it shall not return to me empty,*

 *but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,*

 *and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

The task is finished. All is accomplished. The world can now be powered down and re-booted.

God’s re-creation is just around the corner.

**Interlude - Stainer: Crucifixion (‘God So Loved The World’) 3:37**

## The Seventh Word ‘Reunion’

1450 *Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.* (Luke 23:46)

And with these words, Jesus died. All the way to his death, even though death itself is inevitable, Jesus remains in control of his destiny, and commends his own Spirit into the hands of the Father.

The word Spirit is, of course, identical to the word Breath. Just as God breathed life into the first Adam, so the second Adam returns the divine breath to the Creator. Yet this is more than a return of the divine breath or spirit. Jesus’ words are taken from another Psalm which Jesus is quoting from the Cross - this time, Psalm 31:

*“Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.”*

*Psalm 31:5 (NRSV)*

Thus by saying these words, Jesus is also declaring the Father as the Redeemer, the Lord, the Faithful One. It is God who saves, and with this dying creed, Jesus returns his Spirit to God the Father from whom it came, with whom Jesus existed from the beginning of time - as Paul writes to the Colossians,

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;”*

*Colossians 1:15 (NRSV)*

And as the Gospel of John opens,

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”*

*John 1:1–2 (NRSV)*

So here, the Spirit of Jesus returns to the Father; at the Ascension, the glorified body of the resurrected Jesus returns to the Father; at Pentecost, God’s Holy Spirit is poured out on all believers. This is the flow of God’s Spirit, God’s breath, through the great story of Scripture.

Luke adds the detail that it is at this point that the veil of the temple is ripped apart. No longer is there any need for a High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies - access is now open to all. No longer is there any need for a sacrifice - Jesus himself is both High Priest and the full, final sacrifice. I could quote from Hebrews, but the whole book really develops this theme. The price is paid in full, for ever.

Wesley’s hymn ‘O Love Divine What Have You Done’ closes our final devotion today, after which we hold silence before we depart quietly when we are ready.

*1 O love divine, what have you done!*

 *The immortal God has died for me!*

 *The Father's co-eternal Son*

 *bore all my sins upon the tree;*

 *the immortal God for me has died!*

 *My Lord, my Love is crucified.*

*2 O look on him, as you pass by;*

 *the wounded Prince of life and peace!*

 *Come, sinners, see your maker die,*

 *and say, was ever grief like his?*

 *Come, feel with me his blood applied;*

 *my Lord, my Love is crucified:*

*3 Is crucified for me and you*

 *to bring us rebels back to God:*

 *believe, believe the record true,*

 *our lives are saved by Jesu' blood!*

 *Pardon for all flows from his side:*

 *my Lord, my Love is crucified.*

*4 Then let us stand beneath the cross,*

 *and feel his love a healing stream,*

 *all things for him account but loss,*

 *and give up all our hearts to him;*

 *of nothing think or speak beside:*

 *my Lord, my Love is crucified.*

*Charles Wesley (1707-1788)*

## Music as we leave in silence

‘O Sacred Head Sore Wounded’ - violin solo