

## Last Words: Words of Hope

Last Words - 1 April 2012

The Rev. Ram López

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***Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"  
And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23.46)***

Famous last words. There are so many to read. As one might expect last words run the gamut. They express regret and satisfaction, fear and courage, despair and hope. Some famous last words are merely the stuff of legends. Some are the real deal. Some are short and sweet. Some are surprisingly detailed and long. Some are funny. Others are sadly tragic. Famous last words are an interesting way to look back on history to discover something about the hearts of famous people. It is often said that the last words spoken by someone represent the most important ideas, thoughts, hopes and dreams of an individual.

Jesus speaks seven sayings, or words, from the cross. These last words are not the uttering of dying man reflecting regret or fear or despair. To say they are words reflecting satisfaction or courage is not even enough. The words Jesus speaks from his cross are words of hope. As he hangs on the cross, his life slipping away, Jesus speaks words that break open hope. The words he speaks are:

*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do. (Luke 23.34)*

*Truly, I say to you, today, you will be with me in paradise. (Luke 23.43)*

*Woman, behold your son; behold your mother (John 19.26-27)*

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27.46)*

*I thirst. (John 19.28)*

*It is finished. (John 19.30)*

*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. (Luke 23.46)*

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In each of these words we move nearer to the source of strength and hope. Jesus on the cross vividly portrays the truth that taking up our cross and following him is not meant to be easy. Taking up our cross and following Jesus means we face head on the struggles of life. Thus we find the path to redemptive hope and grace. In these words we join Jesus in exploring anew the dimensions of forgiveness, salvation, relationship, abandonment, distress, triumph, and reunion. And we discover an alternative way of living life that is infinitely more whole and more real than we have experienced in the world.

There are many, perhaps some of you here today, who wish we could forego the brutality of the cross, who would wish we could slip right past Good Friday and go right to Easter Sunday. “Let us not think about pain, suffering, betrayal, abandonment, and lost relationships, Pastor, those things are too heavy. Give us the happy gospel. Give us the prosperity gospel. Tell us that everything will work out if we just follow the rules and be nice to people. We do not really want to know about sacrifice.”

Yet, Jesus, on this day does not permit us to sugarcoat the cross. To put it mildly, crucifixion is an awful way to die. It was, for Jesus and all its victims, hell on earth. The death was slow and painful. The death was meant to bring maximum suffering and humiliation to both punish the victim and warn others to toe the line. Please notice that Jesus does not say from the cross he was sorry if he offended anyone during his ministry. He did not ask for another chance and promise to not be controversial. Instead, in what can only be described as an act of Divine Defiance, Jesus speaks words of hope to a people who were dangerously close

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to losing hope that God would keep his promise to deliver and save his people from the oppressive powers of the world. Hanging on the cross, Jesus is himself the sign of God's fulfillment of his promise. Jesus himself is the assurance of salvation, a renewed creation and a redeemed humanity. All of history has been moving to this point in which Jesus hangs on the cross. And the history that would be made on the other side of the cross continues to unfold even to this moment.

The challenge for all followers of Jesus is to recognize that we live in an "already but not yet" state of being. The Kingdom has already come, salvation has already been accomplished but the full effects of this reality have not yet been fully experienced in our lives or in the lives of others around us and in the world. The world still seems to be reeling under the effects of one loss piled upon another. In fact, from time to time we feel like we are reeling. This is what the "not yet" feels like.

However, the last words Jesus speaks from the cross always point us to the final victory of God. God has acted – it just looks different than what anyone expected. The work of salvation is completed – it is just going to take longer for some of us to surrender to that graceful new relationship with God and others. The Kingdom of God, the reign of God, breaks in wherever Christ followers sacrifice their allegiance to the ways of the world, lay down their old life and begin to live the new life as a people of hope in a world of loss. As Christians we are to be, first and foremost, hopeful.

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The catechism in the back of our Book of Common Prayers includes on page 861 the following: “What is the Christian hope? The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.” The last words Jesus speaks from the cross remind us to hope. We are to “live with confidence” in “newness of life” and in “fullness of life.” “If anyone is in Christ, behold, the old has passed away, behold the new has come,” is how Paul puts it. (2 Corinthians 5.17) We can be confident that our life, the lives of our loved ones and the life we share together as part of the human race is made new in Christ. We can live confidently that our life is filled with God’s grace and blessing – even if our life does not include ease and comfort and material wealth. ***Hope looks forward, not backward.*** Hope looks forward to the coming of Christ again in glory to claim once and for all the creation of which he was a part of creating (John 1). The hope we share as Christians is one which accepts that God has a plan and a purpose for each of us, and for His church, that aligns with His greater plan for the salvation and renewal of the world.

***Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23.46)*** The final act of Jesus on the cross is to “commit his spirit” to God. We might say he “let loose his spirit” as he exhaled his final breath. Luke’s version offers us a foreshadowing of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus that will happen 50 days after the Resurrection (see Acts 2.1ff). Jesus’ spirit fires our hope. We hope because Jesus has left us his own spirit to give us the strength to

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trust and to endure, to forgive and to reconcile, to live and to die as God's people. We hope because we know that God is accomplishing greater than we "could ever ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3.20) in Jesus' moment of suffering which seems from our perspective so full of despair and hopelessness. Even with the cross in plain sight, we no longer live as those without hope. We hope because Jesus has given us his last words, his words of hope, to carry us forward from this day to Easter and beyond.