

**Love Unknown:  
A Meditation on the Seven Last Words from the Cross  
Good Friday, 2017.**

**Preached by Dr. Roberta Barker  
at  
Saint George's Round Church, Halifax**

**The First Word: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**

“My song is love unknown, / My Savior’s love to me: / Love to the loveless shown, / That they might lovely be. / Oh, who am I / That for my sake / My Lord should take / Frail flesh and die?” This hymn, written by the English clergyman Samuel Crossman in 1664, was sung in this church last Sunday. It tells the story of the event that we are called to contemplate today: the Passion and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ. “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, to witness a mystery which astounds and stupefies, a mystery before which all words seem cheap, and every symbol seems too shallow.” So the Reverend Dr. Robert Darwin Crouse, who was a teacher to many of us here, once wrote in a sermon for Good Friday: “What thoughts, or what emotions can embrace such horrendous contradictions: the Son of God is spitted on; the Son of God, the Word of Life, goes down to death. How can we contemplate such things? How can we even begin to understand?”

We quail before this task, and rightly so. As I begin these meditations, I am overcome by shame at my unworthiness and foolishness in presuming to speak of the Seven Last Words of Our Lord from the Cross. In a twelfth-century sermon that Father Crouse believed to be the first ever preached on the Seven Last Words, Arnaud de Bonneville declares that “in these brief words, Christ recapitulated all his teaching ... [that] from a tiny seed there might arise a vast universe of believers.” Oh, who am I, to dare to comment on such a precious legacy before the assembly of so many believers? What can I possibly know of this great and surpassing mystery? This same question troubled the great English poet John Donne, in his poem “Good Friday 1610, Riding Westward,” where he asks,

**Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,  
And tune all spheares at once peirc'd with those holes?  
Could I behold that endlesse height which is**

**Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,  
Humbled below us? or that blood which is  
The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,  
Made durt of dust, or that flesh which was worne  
By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?**

Clearly, these questions also troubled Samuel Crossman: “my song is love *unknown*,” he writes. Perhaps our sense of our own inadequacy is simply the place at which we all must begin this act of contemplation, confessing that we do *not* know Our Savior’s Love to us, but begging Him in His great mercy and compassion to teach us that love, once more, from the heart of his suffering, so that from this tiny seed our faith might grow.

“Oh, who am I, that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?” Crossman asks this question, and we too must ask it in the face of Christ’s words from the cross, in the face of this great and terrible spectacle of *the* Word of God – the Word which was in the beginning – broken, bleeding, suffering, and dying for us. But more, we must ask, who is *He*? It is these questions that I hope humbly to contemplate along with you today, with the help of many readers wiser than I—including especially Father Crouse, who declared in this church on Good Friday 1999 that “the true glory of this day, the very heart of heaven, held within the hard and bitter rind of Calvary, is most perfectly opened for us in the words of Jesus from the Cross.” Let us, then, kneel at the foot of the cross and listen humbly to these words. “My song is love unknown.”

*And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.*

*Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.*

*And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.*

*(Luke 23:33-35)*

Oh, who am I? As he hangs upon the cross, between two thieves, Jesus answers this question very succinctly. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” In this first word, Father Crouse

wrote in 1999, we “overhear the word of God’s eternal counsel.” It sees us as we are. We are those who, from the very beginning, have not understood what we did. This is not to say that we have not been responsible, or that we did not choose. We *have* chosen, over and over again, the forbidden fruit of the tree of good and evil—as much this year as in the year of Christ’s death. We have closed our eyes and ears to the eternal Word of God. We have followed the devices and desires of our own hearts. We are the ones who sit casting lots and arguing over who gets Christ’s raiment while the broken body from which it has been stripped redeems the world. But we think, always, that we are opening the way of happiness for ourselves through such choices. If only we had that nice coat, woven without a seam from top to bottom, we would be happy! If only we could choose for ourselves, we would be happy! If only we knew good and evil! If only we were free! All the while our happiness stretches out His arms to us from the true tree of life. We crucify him; we stand beholding; and we see nothing. We allow the hungry to go without food, the naked to shiver in the street, the sick and the imprisoned to lie alone, and we see nothing. We do it unto the least of His little ones, and we do it to Him, over and over. We know not what we do.

So much for “who am I?” But, “Who is He?”—that is quite another matter. First of all, He is the one who calls, always, upon the mercy of His Father: “*Father, forgive them!*” The Seven Last Words, Father Crouse observed, begin and end in heaven; they begin and end in the word “Father,” in the intimacy of the Incarnate Son and his Father, and in the life of prayer by which the Son, during His time on earth, ceaselessly affirmed their oneness. Here we see that divine intimacy revealed to us in Christ’s words as absolute love, utter compassion, perfect forgiveness. Jesus has just endured the nails, the whips, the crown of thorns—and perhaps even more biting, the contempt, the mockery, the pain of rejection by His own. And still he opens his arms and embraces us as we are: all His children here, as our late friend Leonard Cohen wrote, sinful and pitiable, but still dressed in the rags of His light.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Our Lord is not negotiating with some distant interlocutor who might conceivably disagree with him. “To this end was I born,” he has just told Pilate, “and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth”; that truth is the Father, and earlier in his ministry, He had declared that “I and the Father are one.” When Jesus calls upon God’s compassion, He is simultaneously expressing that compassion; His very existence on earth is an expression of it, since “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” The cross, then, is the ultimate triumph of

divine charity, the ultimate revelation of God's nature as perfect love. As we pursue death, mistaking it for life, He grants us life in the very midst of His death. We know not what we do, but He knows: He knows the Father, and in His oneness with the Father, He knows – He *is* – the love that is all-sufficient to redeem us. He is, as Crossman wrote, “my friend, / my friend indeed, / who at my need, / his life did spend.” He is the one who, even as the nails pierce His hands and feet, says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

**The Second Word: Truly I say unto you, today you shall be with me in paradise.**

*And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.*

*But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?*

*And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.*

*And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*

*And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23: 39-43)*

At the moment of this second word from the Cross, we find Our Lord hanging between the two thieves, one of whom reviles him and the other of whom calls upon His mercy. If we ask again Crossman's question—"Oh, who am I, / that for my sake / My Lord should take / Frail flesh and die"—then here we get another answer. We are like these two thieves. Like them, we are faced with the fact of our own mortality. On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded of that fact: "Remember O man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return." We all go down to the grave. But here, on Calvary, the two thieves face this common doom in a very immediate way. They are about to die—to meet, as the saying goes, their Maker. But on this strangest and most sacred of days, they also meet Him hanging beside them, a dying man, upon the cross.

At the same time, they—and we—are also radically unlike Jesus. Though treated as a malefactor and judged among criminals, Our Lord can never steal, for "all things come of Him, and of His own do we give Him." But his fellow prisoners—and we—are thieves. In his 1999 meditation on this word, Father Crouse reflects that "these thieves, between whom our Lord hangs crucified, must stand for all of us; and their deeds of theft must represent the thievery of all and each of us." Their sin, for which the second of them confesses they are "justly" condemned, is the sin of our first parents: "that thievery which reaches out and grasps the fruit of the forbidden tree," desiring to take from God the power that is His alone to judge of good and evil. We might think here, too, of the teenaged St. Augustine, stealing pears with his friends only to throw most of them to the pigs. Trying later in life to explain this strange impulse, Augustine described it as the seizure of "a pretend liberty, a shadowy likeness of omnipotence": a desire to take for himself the radical freedom of God. "Imagine," writes Father Crouse: "good and evil in your own possession, as a function of your own arbitrary will! ... Good and evil merely your opinion, your

own particular preference ... ! There is the fundamental theft: that presumptuous act of will which thinks to hold within its own possession the prerogatives of God.” And of that theft, we are all justly condemned.

Oh, who am I? If we look to the two thieves for answer, we are left with a new question: which of them are we, or can we be? Surely we can, all of us, see something all too uncomfortably of ourselves in the first thief, who, faced with the final frustration of his delusions of freedom and with the implacable fact of his own mortality, rebels against and mocks at God. What God could possibly will, not only the suffering of flawed human beings, but his own Son’s suffering? Clearly this is impossible; a ‘real’ God would eliminate suffering altogether: “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” The first thief, like so many others standing around the cross, and like so many of us so often in our prayers, demands a miracle, a solution, an end to pain and struggle: a sign. But no sign shall be given to them, or to us, upon this day, but the sign of Jonah: the sign of death, and of resurrection.

The second thief, astonishingly, seems somehow to grasp this fact. He accepts his own guilt, the justice of his own sentence; indeed, he seems to perceive the justice not only of human but of divine law, and the mystical relationship of Jesus the Christ to it: “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?” It is not only human authorities, but God, who has weighed a thieving humanity in the balance and found it wanting. Not only the judgment seat of Pilate, but also the flaming sword of the cherubim that barred our parents from the gates of Eden, seem to stand behind his admission: “And we indeed are condemned justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds.” “But this man hath done nothing amiss”: Christ is not only innocent of the crimes with which he is charged on earth, but altogether innocent in the eyes of God. He is the spotless lamb offered up for humanity in one full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice. By some great gift of God, for surely it cannot come solely from himself, the “Good Thief” sees where all this ends, and responds with perfect simplicity. He does not ask to be saved from death; he does not even ask to be saved eternally; he simply asks to be remembered. Faced with the terrible memory that haunts all mortals – “Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return”—he asks that *he* be taken up into the memory of the dying man next to him, who is also his eternal Lord. “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” In one of his sermons, St. Augustine cries out in wonder at these words: “To this faith I know not what can be added. If they trembled who saw Christ raise the dead, he believed who saw Him hanging with himself on the cross.

Assuredly Christ found not so great faith in Israel, nay, in the whole world.” If the first thief is us in our moments of greatest darkness, surely the second thief holds out to us the vision of our own possibility: of a faith no bigger than a mustard seed, that nevertheless is great enough to transform the world.

For what is Christ’s word in response to the thief? A word of equal simplicity: “Truly I say unto you, today you shall be with me in paradise.” What the Good Thief did not dare, or perhaps even think, to ask for, Jesus freely and immediately grants: eternal life. His divine love and compassion are revealed as utterly transformative in the midst of so much squalor, terror, and pain. He not only forgives those around Him, but to the one who turns to Him in even the most uncertain flash of faith, He offers a place in His father’s house. In a fourth-century homily on the Cross and the Thief, St. John Chrysostom marvels at this generosity: “We find no one before the thief to have merited the promise of paradise, not Abraham, not Isaac, not Jacob, not Moses, not the Prophets or Apostles, but before all we find the thief.” The great curse of the original theft, the burning sword of the cherubim at the gates of Eden, the dusty answer of our mortality: with this word of perfect, unalloyed love Christ casts them all aside and invites us—so many little thieves—to follow him upon another way.

As Father Crouse put it: “there is a remedy against the serpent’s sting. Oh, not of our own devising, not of our discovery, not of our invention: not another of our proud towers which can never reach to heaven. Not our work—the thief is empty-handed now, with nothing to offer”—the fruits of his desperate thievery all dropped away—“but the work of God’s own mercy, in His well-beloved Son.” “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” Christ had told his disciples; “if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” This is the same Christ who an ancient homilist imagined harrowing hell and calling Adam and Eve out of their bondage, saying, “Rise, let us leave this place. The enemy led you out of the earthly paradise, I will not restore you to that paradise, but I will enthrone you in heaven. ... The bridal chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.”

Who is *He*? Lifted up upon the cross, a dying man among dying men, He is yet God everlasting, obliterating mortality and calling us his eternal dwelling places. In His death, He offers us life: and that life He figures as intimacy and companionship with Him forever: “Truly I say unto you, today *you shall*

*be with me* in paradise.” Oh, my friend, my friend indeed. To such generosity we can only respond with the empty-handed humility of the thief: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

### **The Third Word: Woman, Behold Thy Son! Behold Thy Mother!**

*Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. (John 19: 25-27)*

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” This great Sorrow Song, one of the many sacred masterpieces of the African Diaspora, asks us very explicitly to place ourselves at the foot of the cross. So, too, does the third word of Christ. Countless painters have imagined this scene: the women and men who loved Jesus standing weeping around the cross, full of grief and horror. The great 13<sup>th</sup>-century Latin hymn so familiar to us from the settings of Vivaldi and Pergolesi offers us an indelible image of Christ’s mother herself in this terrible moment: “*Stabat mater dolorosa / Juxta crucem lacrimosa / Dum pendeat filium.*” (“There stood the sorrowful mother, / in tears, beside the cross / Where hung her son.”) That poet – perhaps the great Franciscan Jacopone da Todi—was braver than most. Many of his brothers and sisters in the poetic tradition have been cowed by the very thought of contemplating Mary’s anguish at the crucifixion. John Donne, in 1610, asked, “durst I / Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye, / Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus / Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?” Hundreds of years later, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova could find no image to fit the agony of mothers whose children were lost in the Stalinist terrors except that of the scene on Calvary:

Magdalena beat her breast and wept, while  
The loved disciple seemed hammered out of stone.  
But for the Mother, where she stood in silence, --  
No one so much as dared to look that way.

Oh, who am I? If I am like Donne and Akhmatova – and I, for one, certainly am—I fear to look at the face of Our Lady at the foot of the cross, for fear that I will see there a face of loss all too recognizable to me from my own losses: the face of the god-bearer, sodden like my own with grief. This is an unbearable thought, made all the more so by my guilt in the matter. As the *Stabat Mater* poet puts it, “*tui nati vulnerati, / Tam dignati pro me pati / Poenas mecum divide*” —“Let me share with thee his pain, who for all

my sins was slain, who for me in torment died.” Who am I? I am both mourner and murderer in this scene: an uncomfortable position.

So much for me – but who is Christ, here? He is, first of all, his Incarnate self: a son and a friend, dying not only among jeerers, strangers, and thieves, but among the people who have loved him most on earth. The movement of the first four words carries us ever closer to the Incarnate heart of Jesus. In the first, He looks down from his lonely wooden tower on his tormentors like Salvador Dali’s Christ of Saint John of the Cross: infinitely compassionate, infinitely suffering, and infinitely far above us in the eternal charity of the godhead: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” In the second, He turns His head, crowned with thorns, toward the good thief in a gesture of personal love and acceptance: “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” In the third, He looks upon the people he knows and loves best: his mother, and his beloved disciple, telling Mary, “Woman, behold thy son!”, and the disciple, “Behold thy mother!” As St. Augustine writes, the humanity of Christ is at stake here, “now, when in the midst of **human** sufferings, He commend[s] with human affection [the mother] by whom He had become man.” St. John Chrysostom, too, sees the scene as epitomizing the truth of Christ’s humanity: “For since it was likely that, being His mother, she would grieve, and require protection, He with reason entrusted her to the beloved. ... [and if He] were not born according to the flesh, nor had a mother, wherefore takes He such forethought for her alone?” In this word of tenderness, then, we see how the divine compassion that we have been exploring became entwined in the incarnation with the most familiar of human feelings—how God’s nature becomes entwined with our own.

But Christ is in this word, and we are in this word, in another way, too. Christ not only entrusts his mother to the beloved disciple, but he also entrusts the beloved disciple to his mother: “Woman, behold thy son!” He not only cares for them, but He also places them in a new and permanent position of reciprocity and relationship with one another; he makes of them a new family, founded upon His will and His love. The night before His passion—the night of the Passover and the washing of the feet --He had told his disciples, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all *men* know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” Now, even as He dies, He continues to build the foundations of this new community. Within the souls of two of the people he surely loved and trusted most in human terms, he continues to construct something eternal: our beloved mother, his Holy Church.

For Father Robert Crouse, this is the crucial point: in the midst of this searing scene of human grief and tenderness, not only death but new birth is taking place. He writes,

Here, at the cross, in the sacred reciprocity of charity, the new community of faith is constituted. And that new community must ever live within the mystery of Calvary; it must show forth Christ's death – that great mystery of Charity—in all the world, until He come again. Its character and its own true nature are declared in signs of body broken and blood outpoured, as the Lord Himself commanded.

He bids his mother and his beloved disciple give themselves to one another, to become bone of one another's bone and flesh of one another's flesh. And so He commands all of us: all His children here, in our rags of light. We are to give ourselves to one another, to pour ourselves out for one another – “To serve! To serve!” as Kundry cries in Wagner's *Parsifal* – just as Christ poured himself out for us. On the verge of His loneliest moment, Jesus is concerned to make a community for us, and to ensure that we make community for others: for the mothers who have lost their children, the friends who are left friendless, the homeless and the destitute, the despised and rejected of men. In this new household, this church, as St. Paul writes, “we, *being many*, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.”

*Fac ut ardeat cor meam in amando Christum Deum, ut sibi complaceam*: so begs the poet of the *Stabat Mater*. Let my heart burn with the love of Christ, my God, so that I may please Him. If we dare to look upon the faces of Mary, of Magdalen, of the beloved disciple, we will certainly see a pain all too familiar to us as mortal beings, and we will certainly see our own guilt. But we will also see—and hear in the words of Christ—an invitation to be illuminated and inspired by the light of God's self-giving love, and to become builders of the New Jerusalem here on earth, just as they were. And if we are alone, and grieving, and uncertain, perhaps we may find in this scene only our reflection but our remedy: a new and eternal family, offered to us by the Son of God and of Mary, if we will only accept His invitation. “Son, behold thy mother! Woman, behold thy son!”

## **The Fourth Word: My God, My God, Why Has Thou Forsaken Me?**

*Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

If we feared to look at the face of the grieving Mary, how much more must we fear to look on the face of Christ at this moment of utter darkness over all the land. Can we stand to hear the Son of God, who is Himself God Eternal, cry out in agony that he is God-forsaken? If we want to hear the voice of the Angel of Easter—“He is not here, He is risen”—we must surely hear this word first. For “we preach Christ crucified: unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” We must accept the scandal of the cross—but that does not make it easy.

Oh, who am I? I am a mortal, and the daughter of mortals. I have been at an awful lot of funerals this year. Perhaps you have, too. Many of us in this church are preparing to attend the funeral of a great, good, and wise man, Dr. Angus Johnston, on Easter Monday. No matter how great our faith, no matter how we identify with the Good Thief’s prayer or accept the commission that Christ gave to his disciples when he bid them to love one another, it is still difficult to surmount at such moments the sense that some great injustice is being done. In February, I attended the funeral of a beautiful, joyful, and gifted young musician, dead at only 32 from brain cancer. As one of the readings for his burial mass, his family chose this fourth word from the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” For most mortal beings, their choice must touch a nerve. The words of Christ are also the words of the psalmist, asking the same, ancient question: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.” What have I done, to feel such pain? Why do You not care, God? Why do you not hear?

In the second word, we heard the first thief express a bitter, mocking version of this complaint: “If thou *be* Christ, save thyself and us.” Then, the complaint was dissipated, first by the Good Thief’s admission of his own guilt, and second by Christ’s invitation: “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” But now, we have moved further inward, toward the very heart of Christ’s passion. And now it is He,

Himself, who feels the abandonment of God. In one sense, this is the moment in His passion when the questions we have been asking—“who am I?” and “who is He?”—come closest to having the same answer. Christ, at this moment, is utterly and terribly human, as we all are in the face of death. As St. Ambrose writes in “Of the Christian Faith,” “it was in human voice that He cried, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ As human, therefore, he speaks on the cross, bearing with him our terrors. For amid dangers it is a very human response to think oneself abandoned.” In a sense, then, this is the moment of greatest fellowship between Jesus and those for whom he died.

In another sense, however, this is the moment when Jesus is the most separate from us, the most different from us, the most different from all other beings, the most terribly alone. For we, at funerals or even upon our own deathbeds, experience what all other human beings have experienced or will experience. But Christ, at this moment, knows what no other has known: he is fully God, yet feels fully abandoned by God. He who has always so far called upon God as His Father, even from the cross, now calls in the voice of the psalmist: “My God, My God,” as though their eternal kinship had been severed. He who so far has always spoken in relation to others, even from the cross—“forgive them,” “thou shalt be with me,” “behold thy son”—now speaks only of and from his own suffering. “It is,” writes Father Crouse, “as though Jesus must go on alone, and others, faithful or unfaithful, can only watch and witness.” At this moment, Christ drinks the very dregs of the cup that, the night before, He had asked to have pass from Him: forsaken by Judas and Peter, wronged by human injustice, separated—as he cries—even by His Father. His experience is truly expressed in the passage of the lamentations of Jeremiah that we have just heard sung: “*O vos omnes qui transitis per viam*”—All ye who pass by in the way, look and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.

And yet, and yet: the psalm from which Our Lord quotes in his agony continues in quite a different vein: “But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. / Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. / They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded.” As Father Crouse writes, “This fourth word, this cry of dereliction, is the nadir of descent. But it is also a turning point, the starting point of the return of the Son to the Father, as from a distant country ... the cry of dereliction is also a cry of the purest faith.” In the moment of greatest agony, Christ no longer sees, no longer feels, that oneness with the Father that we so often heard Him proclaim as His comfort in the gospels (as, say, at the death of Lazarus, when in the midst of His

tears He says, “I knew that thou hearest me always”). But faith, as St. Paul, Dante, and Father Crouse all remind us, is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”—and in this dark night of the soul, Christ’s first thought remains the same: “My God, My God.” His faith in God is always present and absolute, even in the darkness of all else.

In His “Homily on the Gospel of Matthew,” St. John Chrysostom underlines this point, and indeed suggests that at the very height of His abandonment Christ, in his loneliness, is still affirming his oneness with God. Chrysostom asks,

Why does he speak this way, crying out, “Eli, Eli, lama sabach-thani?” That they might see that to his last breath he honors God as his Father and is no adversary of God. He spoke with the voice of Scripture, uttering a cry from the psalm. Thus even to his last hour he is found bearing witness to the sacred text. He offers this prophetic cry in Hebrew, so as to be plain and intelligible to His people, and by all things Jesus shows how he is of one mind with the Father who had begotten him.

So the moment that appears to separate Jesus from God also unites them perfectly in faith. It is the moment when Christ is most like us in His agony and doubt, but it is also the moment when He challenges us most, for His faith truly is made utterly perfect in weakness, as ours so often struggles to be. Who is He? “Steadfast he,” as Crossman says, “to suffering goes / That he his foes from thence might free.” He is steadfast in faith and love to the last. And so he offers us an eternal model and guide, an inspiration in the darkness, even as He cries out: “My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?”

### **The Fifth Word: I thirst.**

*After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. (John 19:28-29)*

Now, as the end comes near, we move toward the final words of Christ: very short phrases, most of them, as if coming already from a breath that is nearly spent, but also words to which the sense of composure and steadfastness has returned after the painful cry of *Eli, Eli!* In the fifth word, he says only, “I thirst.” On the simplest level, we get here our final glimpse – at least in language – of the mundane life of Jesus’ Incarnate self, born of the Virgin Mary. Hanging for hours on the cross, He is thirsty, parched: many of those subjected to this cruel death under the hot sun of Jerusalem must after all have died from dehydration before the suffocation kicked in. Who am I? I am a mortal creature who has pleasure and pain in the flesh: who enjoys and longs for food, drink, warmth, comfort, and shelter, and who feels hunger, thirst, cold, pain, and want. Who is He? He too has felt these things, to the very extremity of suffering: for as St. Paul writes in his Epistle to the Hebrews, “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as *we are*, yet without sin.”

Yet like the others, this word cuts much deeper than is apparent on its surface, and tells us much more about both ourselves and our friend, Jesus, than the fact that we both exist in our bodies, in their beauties and infirmities, weaknesses and strengths. In Mark’s Gospel, as you’ll remember, we are given a little more information about the vinegar – or sour wine – that is offered to Jesus; Mark says that “they gave Him to drink wine mingled with myrrh,” perhaps as a pain-killer or soporific, in an act of some kind of mercy. Yet Mark tells us that Jesus “received it not.” He did not, after all, quench his thirst; He did not, after all, accept the soporific. What, then, did He want? What longings was He expressing, if not simply a longing to allay his physical needs?

Jesus cries out, “I thirst,” and one of the bystanders reaches up a sponge full of vinegar on a reed of hyssop, and puts it to His mouth. As St. Augustine reminds us, this tiny moment is packed with references to the psalms. It directly recalls Psalm 69, “Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked *for some* to take pity, but *there was* none; and for comforters, but I found none. / They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” Augustine also links

it to that great penitential Psalm, 51; not for nothing, he writes, is it a reed of hyssop on which the sponge is offered, for the psalmist had written “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” As at the nadir of His pain, so here in the failing moments of his mortal body Jesus still affirms his immortal and eternal nature as the Word of God, the source of all scripture. “Thus,” as Augustine writes, “He who makes the fountains flow is given vinegar to drink”: the irony is bitter, like the drink itself, but the fountain of God’s word never ceases to flow on.

How can “He who makes the fountains” thirst, anyhow? This, after all, is the Christ who said to the woman of Samaria, “whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” How can He thirst, and for what? Father Crouse argues that He does not take the vinegar they offer him because, in fact, his “humanity is so refined in the fires of His Passion, that nothing now remains in it of earthly longing. His thirst is of a different order.” As we strive to understand the nature of this thirst—oh, who is He?—the voice of the psalmist comes to our aid: “LIKE as the hart desireth the water-brooks : so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God : when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?” Christ, the Word of God, longs to be one with his Father. “Jesus thirsts,” writes Father Crouse, “but He will not drink the fruit of the vine until He drinks it new—trodden in the winepress of His passion—in God’s eternal kingdom.”

To explain this longing of Christ, Father Crouse turns to a quotation from Augustine’s *Confessions* that was clearly very close to his heart, for it runs through all his writings like a golden thread. He writes:

Human thirsts are manifold. Our wayward, fallen nature thirsts for the sour wine, the vinegar and bitter herbs of lust and greed and avarice and sloth, of wrath and pride and envy? But what are these thirsts, which are never satiated? What are they but the lust for soporifics, to dull and divert that thirst which belongs to the true heart of humanity? “Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

It is this restless longing, Father Crouse suggests, that Jesus not only feels but actually *becomes* for us when he declares “I thirst”: the longing to rest in God, leaving behind all the illusions of this earth that—like the water of Jacob’s well—will always leave us thirsty once again. He embodies both the longing for living water, and its fulfilment; He *is* the very God for whom he longs, and for whom we long. “For

happiness I long have sought, and pleasure dearly have I bought,” says a familiar eighteenth-century poem: “I missed of all, but now I see / Tis found in Christ the Apple Tree.” Who is He? He is our friend, our friend indeed—who feels our thirst, and who also assuages it.

Who, as I gaze upon such a friend, am I? Thérèse of Lisieux, the author of *L’Histoire d’un âme* and one of the greatest of modern Catholic saints, was haunted by the idea that just as she thirsted for the love of Jesus, so too He—on the cross—thirsted for the love of God and for the love of human souls, desiring not only to come to His Father himself but to draw all men after Him. What could she do, in the face of such longing, she asked? She, too, could seek to come where He was, eternally with the Father; she, too, could seek to participate in the eternal work of drawing love to Him. “The cry of my dying savior—‘I thirst!’—sounded incessantly in my heart,” she says, “and kindled in it a burning zeal hitherto unknown to me.” Or as another, much earlier, saint—Ignatius of Antioch—writes, “My love has been crucified, and now there is no fire of earthly longing in me, but only living, speaking water crying out within me, come to the Father.” We might reach farther back still, to the prophet Isaiah, and hear the voice that calls to us from his ancient pages:

All you who are thirsty,  
come to the water!  
You who have no money,  
come, receive grain and eat;  
come, without paying and without cost,  
drink wine and milk!  
Why spend your money for what is not bread,  
your wages for what fails to satisfy?  
Heed me, and you shall eat well,  
you shall delight in rich fare.  
Come to me heedfully,  
listen, that you may have life.  
I will renew with you the everlasting covenant,  
the benefits assured to David.

On the cross, even as Christ thirsts in the body and as His liquid blood is poured out for us, that blood seals the new and everlasting covenant that invites us all to come to the waters, to become one with the God who made us. The suffering and the covenant, the pain and the invitation, are the same, for “I,” says Christ, “if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” Who am I? I am one, now, who can share in this true thirst of Christ—the thirst for the living God—and can have it, at last, assuaged. Let me, then, like Christ, thirst indeed, and be satisfied.

### **The Sixth Word: It is finished.**

*When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished. (John 19:30)*

And now, at last, after the taunts, the jeering, and the pain—“After,” as T.S. Eliot writes, “the torchlight red on sweaty faces / After the frosty silence in the gardens / After the agony in stony places / The shouting and the crying / Prison and palace and reverberation”—after all this, we hear the next to last word of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and it sounds with something like relief. “It is finished”: Christ has done what he came into the world to do. He has made, in the words of the communion service of the Book of Common Prayer, “by his one oblation of Himself, once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.” Now, at last, He can rest. It is finished.

In Ingmar Bergman’s great film, *The Seventh Seal*, a group of medieval characters—foremost among them the anguished knight, always searching the darkness for a God he cannot find, and his pragmatic squire, who embraces the pleasures of this life and doubts the existence of anything beyond—seek to avoid the embrace of Death, who is stalking their town along with the plague. At the film’s end, Death arrives as the knight and his squire sit at table with their family and friends. The knight’s wife, polite to the last, introduces herself to death and bids him welcome to her house. The Smith, too, introduces himself, and assures death that he was good at his trade and that he and his wife, Lisa, “quarrelled no more than most.” The knight prays passionately: “Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord.” His squire scoffs that there is nothing there in the darkness, and declares that to the end he will triumph in life alone. Last of all, a mysterious young girl, who has suffered much throughout the film and never said a word – we thought she *could* not say a word – falls to her knees. Her eyes are suffused with tears, but she is smiling. “It is finished,” she says.

There are many ways to read both Christ’s second to last word and the girl’s one and only comment in Bergman’s film, which is an echo of Our Lord’s. Who am I, and who is He? The Mute Girl in *The Seventh Seal*, and Christ upon the cross, are both human beings who have endured agony, as so many human beings do in living and dying: not only physical pain, but mental anguish, fear, anxiety, doubt (“*Eli, Eli... !*”), despair. They have struggled and endured in the face of this anguish, and now

death comes to relieve them. After all our terror of it, death comes as a blessed release; no wonder the girl is smiling in Bergman's film. *Schlummert ein, ihr matten augen*, as the Bach cantata has it: Sleep, my tired eyes; fall softly and peacefully closed. Or to quote from the end of another Bach masterwork, the St. Matthew Passion, *Nun ist der herr zu ru' gebracht, / Mein Jesu, gute nacht*: Now at last my Lord is brought to rest: My Jesus, goodnight.

But of course, that is not all there is to it. Bound up with the ending, there is a beginning. The Greek word Christ uses, "*Tetelestai*," is full of meaning and resists easy translation into English; as Father Crouse notes, however, citing C.H. Dodd, "its dominant meaning in all periods of Greek is 'fulfil,' 'accomplish,' 'perform', 'bring to completion.' In the Latin Vulgate Bible, it was famously translated *consummatum est*: it is finished, it is consummated. Christ has accomplished the great work he set out to perform: the salvation of the world. "The sacrifice of Calvary," as Father Crouse writes, "is something done for us, which we could not do: something we can only gratefully and thankfully accept." And yet this completed work starts a new work in humankind. As the shadow of death falls over her in *The Seventh Seal*, the Mute Girl smiles radiantly and speaks for the first time. It is as if she sees, on the other side of this encounter with death, the possibility of an entirely new and happy way of being.

Oh, who am I? What might this new and happy way of being look like? In "Good Friday, 1610: Riding Westward," John Donne pictures himself riding in the opposite direction from the east, from Jerusalem, the site of Christ's passion and of his rising. It is an image of his own fear and doubt, his face turned away from that of the dying Christ as if in fear of contemplating the truths about himself reflected there (oh, who am I?). Yet he begs:

O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;  
I turne my backe to thee, but to receive  
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.  
O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,  
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

As so often in his poetry, so here Donne begs to be violently punished, burned, remade, reformed so that he may be worthy of God. But this punishment, the correction Donne seeks, was laid on Christ. “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” So our new life must not be a cycle of self-punishment, or of efforts to “make it up” to God. No—“it is finished.” That consummation is who Christ is.

Who, then, am I, that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die? I am the empty-handed thief, who through no worthiness of my own has been invited into the everlasting halls. What is demanded of me is not my own atonement for the great theft; “it is finished.” Rather, what is demanded of me is that I truly, deeply—and yes, in the eyes of the present world perhaps madly—contemplate and accept the sacrifice of Christ. Truly to contemplate that sacrifice is to invite a radical transformation of our inner selves, a conformation of those selves to Christ. The cross of Christ speaks to me as the archaic torso of Apollo spoke to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, saying, “You Must Change Your Life.”

I must become a servant of all, as Christ was: a servant able to look upon the daily deaths of self my service demands of me, as well as the great and final death of the body, with a smile of grateful acceptance. In me, the work is just beginning. But I know that it is possible, and indeed that in some deep sense—not always accessible to me in my struggles, but no less true for that—it is already accomplished. We may sing Hosanna to the Son of David once more: “It is finished.”

**The Seventh Word: Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.**

*And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. (Luke 23:46)*

Having come to this point, there is very little left to say. Traditionally during readings of the Passion in many churches, the congregation has knelt in silence after the words I have just read; and silence, surely, better fits this final word and the moment of Christ's death than speech. I have already spoken too much about things I "understand not; things too wonderful for me, which I know not." Let me then, share just a few last reflections, drawing once again from those wiser than myself, and then leave us to silence and to music, which best fit this day.

In his 1999 meditation on the Seven Last Words, Father Crouse underlines two key aspects of this final word from the cross. The first is to remind us that "the last word from the Cross, just as the first word from the Cross, is the word of Son to Father. ... It all begins and ends in heaven. The word of God goes forth, and the word of God returns." He also notes that Christ returns his spirit to rest in God with this, His seventh word, just as God rested on the seventh day of creation. "This is the Sabbath rest of Christ. The Cross is bitter labour; but it is also rest, and peace, and reconciliation." Having experienced the most intense feelings of abandonment and alienation from His Father, Christ now abandons himself in perfect faith, hope, and love, into that Father's arms. As He goes, He carries our humanity with him. "In my Father's house are many mansions," Christ had told his disciples; "if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

Amazing love! Who am I, and how can I possibly repay this "love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be?" The final word of Christ from the cross offers me one answer: surrender. In the last of all his many words to us, our savior models nothing more or less than perfect trust in our God, whose "will is our peace": "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." But how can we, who are *not* perfect, who are tempted constantly to theft and worldly thirsts and angry defiance, possibly find such surrender? Again, Christ models for us the answer: in prayer. He begins and ends his words from the cross in prayer to His Father: at the beginning, a prayer of forgiveness and compassion for others ("Father, forgive them"); at the end, a prayer of self-abnegation and love ("Into thy hands"). I would be deluded to think

that I can immediately gain these spiritual heights from out of my depths, or that I could ever attain them by my own strength. But by his faithful cross, that one and only noble tree; by his body and blood, broken and shared with us; and by his eternal words, which will never pass away, Christ has opened the path. To those who turn to Him, He answers with immediate and absolute generosity and love: "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Who am I? I am simply someone who has not merited Christ's generosity and love, but who nevertheless has the glorious opportunity to receive it, and in contemplating *His* great worthiness, to be made new. "Here might I stay and sing, / no story so divine: / never was love, dear King, / never was grief like thine. This is my friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend."