

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Text from the book: "Life of Christ" by Bishop Fulton Sheen

Our Lord spoke seven times from the Cross; these are called His Seven Last Words. In His goodness, Our Blessed Lord left His thoughts on dying. He was representative of all humanity. In this sublime hour He called all His children to the pulpit of the Cross, and every word He said to them was set down for the purpose of an eternal publication and an undying consolation. There was never a preacher like the dying Christ; there was never a congregation like that which gathered about the pulpit of the Cross; there was never a sermon like the Seven Last Words.

THE FIRST WORD

The executioners expected Him to cry, for everyone pinned to the gibbet of the Cross had done it before Him. Seneca [a Roman philosopher] wrote that those who were crucified cursed the day of their birth, the executioners, their mothers, and even spat on those who looked upon them. Hence the executioners expected a word, but not the kind of word that they heard. The Scribes and Pharisees awaited His reaction, and they were quite sure that He Who had preached "Love your enemies," and "Do good to them that hate you," would now forget that Gospel with the piercing of His feet and hands. Every one expected a cry, but no one, with the exception of the three at the foot of the Cross, expected the cry they did hear. Like some fragrant trees which bathe in perfume the very axe which gashes them, the great Heart on the Tree of Love poured out from its depths something less a cry than a prayer – the soft, sweet, low prayer of pardon and forgiveness:

Father forgive them; They do not know what it is they are doing
(Luke 22:34).

Forgive whom? Forgive enemies? The soldier in the courtroom of Caiaphas who struck Him with a mailed fist? Pilate, the politician, who condemned a God to retain the friendship of Caesar? The soldiers who swung the King of Kings on a tree between heaven and earth? Forgive them, why? Because they know not what they are doing. If they knew what they were doing and still went on doing it; if they knew what a terrible crime they were committing by sentencing Life to death; if they knew what a perversion of justice it was to prefer Barabbas to Christ; if they

knew what cruelty it was to take the feet that trod everlasting hills and pinion them to the limb of a tree if they knew what they were doing and still went on doing it, unmindful of the fact that the very Blood which they shed was capable of redeeming them, they would never be saved! It was only the ignorance of their great sin that brought them within the pale of the hearing of that cry from the Cross. It was not wisdom that saved them: it was ignorance!

THE SECOND WORD

The Last Judgment was prefigured on Calvary; the Judge was in the center, and the two divisions of humanity on either side: the saved and the lost, the sheep and the goats. When He would come in glory to judge all men, the Cross would be with Him then too but as a badge of honor, not shame. Two thieves were crucified on either side of Him. The thief on the left asked to be taken down. But the thief on the right, evidently moved by Our Savior's priestly prayer of intercession, asked to be taken up: "*Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom*" Luke 23:42.

A dying man asked a dying man for eternal life; a man without possessions asked a poor man for a Kingdom; a thief at the door of death asked to die like a thief and steal Paradise. One would have thought a saint would have been the first soul purchased over the counter of Calvary by the red coins of Redemption, but in the Divine plan it was a thief who was the escort of the King of kings into Paradise. If Our Lord had come merely as a teacher, the thief would never have asked for forgiveness. But since the thief's request touched the reason of His coming to earth, namely, to save souls, the thief heard the immediate answer:

I promise thee, this day thou shalt be With Me in Paradise
(Luke 23:43).

It was the thief's last prayer, perhaps even his first. He knocked once, sought once, asked once, dared everything, and found everything.

THE THIRD WORD

With a gesture of His dust-filled eyes and His thorn-crowned head, Our Blessed Lord looked longingly at His Mother who was standing beneath the Cross as a cooperator in His Redemption; and He said: "***Woman, this is thy son.***" He did not call him John; to do that would have been to address him as the son of Zebedee and no

one else. But, in his anonymity, John stood for all mankind. To His beloved disciple He said: ***“This is thy mother.”***

Here is the answer, after all these years, to the mysterious words in the Gospel of the Incarnation which stated that Our Blessed Mother laid her “firstborn” in the manger. Did that mean that Our Blessed Mother was to have other children? It certainly did, but not according to the flesh. Our Divine Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was the unique Son of Our Blessed Mother by the flesh. But Our Lady was to have other children, not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit! She became our mother the moment she lost her Divine Son. It was, for the moment, a poor exchange, giving up her Divine Son to win mankind, but in reality, she did not win mankind apart from Him. On that day He began to merge the Divine maternity into the new motherhood of all men; at Calvary He caused her to love men as He loved them.

THE FOURTH WORD

My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?

(Matthew 27:46).

In each of the other words, He acted as the Divine mediator; in the first word, He pleaded for the forgiveness of sinners in general; in the second word, He anticipated His final role at the end of the world when He would separate the good from the bad; in the third word, He was the mediator assigning a spiritual motherhood for redeemed humanity. Now in the fourth word, He acted as mediator for sinful humanity. God and He stand over against each other for the moment. The Old Testament had prophesied that He Who hangs upon a tree is cursed; the darkness gave expression to that burning curse which He would remove by bearing it and triumphing in the Resurrection. One of God’s first great gifts to man was the gift of light which He Himself said He caused to shine upon the just and the wicked; but as mediator and pleader for the emptiness and darkness of sinful hearts, He would deny Himself that primitive gift of light.

Christ’s cry was of abandonment which He felt standing in a sinner’s place, but it was not of despair. The soul that despairs never cries to God. As the keenest pangs of hunger are felt not by the dying man who is completely exhausted but by the man battling for his life with the last ounce of strength, so abandonment was felt not only by the ungodly and unholy but by the most holy

of men, the Lord on the Cross. The greatest mental agony in the world, and the cause of many psychic disorders, is that minds and souls and hearts are without God. Such emptiness would never have a consolation, if He had not felt all of this as His own. From this point on, no atheist could ever say in his loneliness, he does not know what it is to be without God! This emptiness of humanity through sin, though He felt it as His own, was nevertheless spoken with a loud voice to indicate not despair, but rather hope that the sun would rise again and scatter the darkness.

THE FIFTH WORD

There now came a point in the discourse of the Seven Last Words from the Cross which would seem to indicate that Our Blessed Lord was speaking of Himself, whereas in some of the previous words He was speaking to others. But the facts are not quite so simple. It is, indeed, true that the loss of blood through the sufferings, the unnatural position of the Body with the extreme tension on hands and feet, the overstretched muscles, the wounds exposed to air, the headache from the crowning of thorns, the swelling of the blood vessels, the increasing inflammation – all would have produced a physical thirst. It was not surprising that He thirsted; what was surprising was that He said so. He Who threw stars into their orbits and spheres into space, He Who shut up the sea with doors, He Who made waters come out of the rock smitten by Moses, He Who had made all the seas and rivers and fountains, He Who said to the woman of Samaria: *“The man who drinks the water I give him will not know thirst any more,”* now let fall from His lips the shortest of the seven cries from the Cross:

I am thirsty (John 19:28).

The bystanders at the Cross who knew well the Old Testament prophecies were thus given another proof that He was the suffering Messiah. His fourth word, which expressed His sufferings of Soul, and His fifth word, which expressed sufferings of Body, were both foretold, Thirst was the symbol of the unsatisfying character of sin; the pleasures of the flesh purchased at the cost of joy of the spirit are like drinking salt water. The rich man in hell, in the parable, thirsted and begged Father Abraham to ask Lazarus to wet his tongue with but a drop of water. Making complete atonement for sin demanded that the Redeemer now feel the thirst even of the lost before they are lost. But for the saved,

too, it was a thirst – a yearning for souls. Some men have a passion for money, others for fame; His passion was for souls! “Give Me to think” meant “give Me thy heart.” The tragedy of Divine love for mankind is that in His thirst men gave him vinegar and gall.

THE SIXTH WORD

From all eternity God willed to make men in the image of His Eternal Son. Having perfected and achieved this likeness in Adam, He placed him in a garden, beautiful as God alone knows how to make a garden beautiful. In some mysterious way the revolt of Lucifer echoed to earth, and the image of God in man became blurred. The Heavenly Father now willed in His Divine mercy to restore man to his pristine glory, in order that fallen man might know the beautiful image to which he was destined to be conformed. God sent His Divine Son to this earth, not just to forgive sin but to satisfy justice through suffering.

In the beautiful Divine economy of Redemption, the same three things which cooperated in the Fall shared in Redemption. For the disobedient man Adam, there was the obedient new Adam, Christ; for the proud woman Eve, there was the humble new Eve, the Virgin Mary; for the tree of the Garden, there was the tree of the Cross. Looking back on the Divine plan and after having tasted the vinegar which fulfilled the prophecy, He now uttered what in the original is only one word:

It is achieved (John 19:30).

It was not an utterance of thanksgiving that His suffering was over and finished, though the humiliation of the Son of Man was now at an end. It was rather that His life from the time of His birth to the time of His death had faithfully achieved what the Heavenly Father sent Him to do.

THE SEVENTH WORD

One of the penalties imposed on man as a result of original sin was that he would die in body. After the exile from the garden, Adam stumbled upon the limp form of his son Abel. He spoke to him, but Abel did not answer. The head was lifted, but it fell back limp; his eyes were cold and staring. Then Adam remembered that death was the penalty for sin. It was the first death in the world. Now the new Abel, Christ, slain by the race of Cain, prepared to go home. His sixth word was earthward; the seventh was

Godward. The sixth was the farewell to time, the seventh, the beginning of His glory. The prodigal Son was returning back home; thirty-three years before, He had left the Father’s house and gone off into the foreign country of this world. There He began spending His substance, the Divine riches of power and wisdom; in His last hour, His substance of Flesh and Blood was wasted among sinners. There was nothing left to feed upon except the husks and the sneers and the vinegar of human ingratitude. He now entered into Himself and prepared to take the road back home into His Father’s house and as He did so, He let fall from His lips the perfect prayer:

Father, into Thy Hands I commend My spirit (Luke 23:46).

As these words were spoken, there came from the opposite hill of Jerusalem the sound of thousands of lambs who were being slain in the outer court of the temple that their blood might be offered before the Lord God on the altar, and their flesh might be eaten by the people. Whether there is any truth in the teaching of the Rabbis that it was on the same day that Cain slew Abel that God made the Covenant with Abraham, that Isaac was led up to the mountain for sacrifice, that Melchisedech offered bread and wine to Abraham, and that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, we know not; but on this day the Lamb of God was slain and all the prophecies were fulfilled. The work of Redemption was finished. There was a rupture of a heart in a rapture of love; the Son of Man bowed His head and willed to die.