

GOOD FRIDAY--TRE ORE
April 18, 2025
First English, Austin
First Word; Lk.23:32-38

AN UNCOMMON COMMODITY

It can be so easy not to forgive. In part because forgiveness goes against what seems to come naturally. Getting even seems so much easier. Exacting revenge seems to be so much more satisfying.

It's very easy to give assent to the "law of retaliation" (*lex talionis*) found in Exodus 21 (vv.23-25): "...life for life," it declares, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe;" to which we might add things such as insult for insult, hurt feelings for hurt feelings, stepped-on-toes for stepped-on-toes. It just makes such good sense. It's so fair and just.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that retaliation can be very gratifying. It can feel so good to get even when one has been wronged or hurt. Certainly much more enjoyable, and, usually, much easier than swallowing one's pride, licking one's wounds, and offering forgiveness.

After all, those actions can be, and often are, interpreted and dismissed as indicating cowardice, weakness, or a lack of conviction. Getting even, on the other hand, exacting your own "pound of flesh" in return, is seldom interpreted as indicating any of those "weakling" things. #

Forgiveness, for most, if not all, of us is a difficult lesson to learn. And forgiving is a difficult thing to do, most, if not all, of the time. Oh, it's nice, if on occasion uncomfortable, to be on the receiving end of forgiveness, but difficult to be on the giving end.

And even at those times when we do forgive, we and our society usually have a desire, and a need, for justice to be served in the process. And so we forgive in a technical, legal, kind of way, by meting out punishment appropriate to the crime, or the offense, or the hurt feelings (after the example of the "law of retaliation").

And, then, once the punishment has been exacted, the fine paid, the retaliation accomplished, then forgiveness is declared

to be in effect. The offending party has "done his time," she's "paid her debt to society." And the punishment has become the cost, the price, of receiving forgiveness (different only in kind, really, from that Exodus 21 "law of retaliation").

And it does seem to work, after a fashion. Those, for example, who counsel with persons who've had family members murdered report that those individuals frequently do not find relief, release, and closure, until the one who killed their loved one has also been put to death or otherwise severely punished. #

True forgiveness, offered without exacting a price in return for it's being given, tends to be an uncommon, and an unexpected, commodity. And, indeed, in a sinful world it's not a commodity by which society as a whole could function. Sin would run rampant. Things would be a mess. Martin Luther was right when he said that we need the law and the threat of punishment to keep us in line. #

Recognizing and admitting how difficult forgiveness is for us serves to magnify even more the enormity of what Jesus did in this first word from the cross. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

It was not because Jesus was about to die, and so would have no opportunity to get even, that he offered forgiveness. It was not because there would be no possibility for those family members and friends left alive to get revenge or see justice served on his behalf through the social or legal system--it was not for that reason that Jesus offered forgiveness.

It wasn't even because "they didn't know what they were doing," because they were ignorant of Jesus' true identity, because they'd been duped by Jesus' enemies into doing what they were doing--it wasn't for that reason that Jesus offered forgiveness to those who called for and oversaw his execution.

I dare say, Jesus might just as well have said, "Father, forgive them, even though they know exactly what they're doing."

Indeed, much of the time when we offend against and hurt God and one another, we do know exactly what we're doing; and the one to whom it's being done (be it God, or a brother or sister, or sibling) knows that we know.

"Father, forgive them;..." This was forgiveness pure and simple, uncluttered by issues of justice or retaliation.

This was in dramatic contrast to the "day of wrath and doom, the day of tears and mourning, the day of calamity, misery, and everlasting death" to be visited upon sinners by God; a day violently and dramatically portrayed musically by Giuseppe Verdi in the music of the "Dies Irae" movement of his "Requiem". God "getting even," exacting a price, "getting God's pound of flesh" from sinners in retaliation for their wickedness.

"Father, forgive them; ..." This was forgiveness flowing from the heart and love of God. This is the word of God through Christ to each of us and to the world: that God, whom we killed on the cross and continue to wound, does not speak or seek vengeance and retaliation, but offers forgiveness at God's own cost, not ours; both when we don't know what we're doing, and at those time when we do.

The risk God takes is that we will take that forgiveness in Christ and run, never looking back; and in so doing never truly counting its cost, much less appropriating that forgiveness in our own lives.

But the possibility is that, counting the cost, and responding to it and the love that bears it, we will receive that word of forgiveness with humble and contrite hearts, that we will "learn the example" of the cross: the example of God's love, and mercy, and forgiveness; and that our lives will be changed as a result. That we will seek to love as we have been loved, to show mercy as we have received mercy, and to forgive as we have been forgiven. AMEN.

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GOOD FRIDAY—TRE ORE
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First English, Austin
Second Word; Lk. 23:39-43

IN PARADISE. TODAY

It was a plea one might have expected to hear 6 days earlier, on the occasion of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. That, after all, is when people lined the streets and, according to Luke's Gospel, shouted, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Lk. 19:38).

In that setting it would have made sense for someone to cry out "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom" (Lk.39:42)--the cry of one who sees a friend rising to high office and looks for some benefits by association. That Jesus, on that day, looked and acted like a king, or, at least a potential king.

But not this Jesus. Not now. Not in this setting. Not today.

This Jesus did not look to be king or messiah, real or potential. This Jesus looked like an about-to-be-dead man. Hanging on a cross between two other about-to-be-dead men.

Those gathered around the cross recognized that reality. The leaders, scoffing, said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"(Lk.23:35b). To which the soldiers chimed in mockingly, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"(Lk.23:37). And, not to be left out, one of the soon-to-be-dead criminals added contemptuously: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"(Lk.23:39).

And none of them, I'm sure, was even a little bit surprised when Jesus did neither, for they had no expectation that he would, or could, save himself or the criminals hanging on the crosses that day.

The plea of the second soon-to-be-dead criminal, however, quite contrary to the apparent reality of that day, of that hour, was an insight, a cry, of faith. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," he cried out (Lk.23:42), and in so doing acknowledged the reality mockingly proclaimed by the sign hung over Jesus' head: "This is the King of the Jews," it said (Lk. 23:38).

The criminal addressed this non apparent, contrary-to-all-appearances King with the name assigned by the angel at the annunciation of his birth. "...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son," the angel had said to Mary, "and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end," (Lk.1:31-33; cf.2:21). Sounds like a king. And the dying criminal said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And Jesus replied: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

To those who heard it, nothing could have seemed farther from the reality of what they saw that day. If "Paradise" were understood in the sense that had become popular during the Inter-Testamental Period as the realm reserved after death for those who had been righteous before God during their lifetime, then how could a dying blasphemer possibly be offering it to a dying criminal? The prospect was laughable. That Paradise was not Jesus' to offer, and was not the criminal's to enter into! Indeed, neither of them was going to find their way into that Paradise.

Or, if "Paradise" were understood in its more common usage then as a "garden" or "park" that a king would have at his disposal for a place of beauty and quiet private retreat, then the charade of Jesus being the King of the Jews was being carried to the point of being ludicrous. Jesus was, obviously, no king. And he certainly had no private garden to which invite this criminal or anyone else.

[SING] "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom. Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." (ELW #616)

What did this criminal see that no one else did? What enabled him to see the King and his Kingship in this man, Jesus, being crucified and about to die alongside of him? Was it merely the final desperate plea of one about to die, grasping at any particle of hope? Or, was it an affirmation of the truth in an astonishing demonstration of faith contrary to the apparent reality of the moment?

Jesus' response would lead one to believe it was the latter. "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to him, "today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk.23:43).

A promise spoken by Jesus, the innocent sufferer, who was, indeed, the King, spoken to the not-innocent criminal who, recognizing both Jesus' innocence and his kingship, cried out in faith for help, and became the recipient of God's mercy in the person of Jesus, the now-cross-enthroned King.

King Jesus, enthroned on the cross, granted executive clemency. This criminal would dwell in the place of the righteous dead. This criminal would be with Jesus in that place of singular honor, the King's private garden. "Today you will be with me. In Paradise." Jesus' Kingdom, Jesus' kingship, became present reality.

And it still is. On the cross salvation from heaven was announced on earth—for the dying criminal and for us. On the cross Jesus' kingdom became a reality on earth as it is in heaven.

So that when in faith we cry out to the One enthroned on the cross, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," we are confident of Jesus continuing response, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Not, perhaps, today, in the place of the blessed dead, though that "today" will certainly come for each of us; and, truth to be told, we do not know when; but we are confident of being in Jesus' presence when it does.

And not, perhaps, today, in some isolated, quiet, and lovely private place removed from, and sheltering us from, the reality of life's turmoil, pain, confusion and uncertainty; though those moments and places do also come to us on occasion as gifts from our loving God.

But certainly with Jesus, and Jesus with us, today, this day. In the presence of King Jesus today, tomorrow, and forever; a part of Jesus' kingdom; a part of the people of Jesus' kingdom. In life. And in death. In living and in dying. In Paradise. With Jesus, the crucified and risen one. Today. And every today yet to come. AMEN.

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GOOD FRIDAY--TRE ORE
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First English, Austin
Third Word; Jn. 19:25-27

WOMAN, HERE IS YOUR SON; HERE IS YOUR MOTHER

It would've been nice if it'd been that easy: "Woman, here is your son.... Here is your mother." It would've been nice, if it'd been that easy. But I'm sure it wasn't.

O.k., fine, some provision had been made for Mary's future--short term and long. Mother's been provided for. Someone to take her home when this horror story is over; back to Nazareth in Galilee, if that's where she wanted to go; or, to watch over her in Jerusalem, or Bethany, or wherever the days and years ahead might find her. Someone to make sure she wasn't neglected, to see that her needs were met. Someone to provide a helping and guiding hand. Not an unimportant detail then or now.

But that day it probably didn't make things any easier for Mary. It certainly didn't make everything o.k. Being cared for in the days ahead was probably the farthest thing from Mary's mind, the least of her concerns, as she stood with the other women at the foot of the cross.

If Mary was anything like my wife, the mother of our two sons; if Mary was anything like the mothers of other children I know (and there's no reason to believe that she wasn't), then what was filling her mind that day was her son, not herself--her son, Jesus, hanging on a cross in front of her, dying. For no good reason. At least not for any good reason she could understand.

I'm quite confident that Mary wasn't worrying about who was going to care for her after Jesus was dead. Mary wanted her son! Now! Off the cross! Alive!

She didn't want to hear about being cared for by a surrogate son--even if the arrangement was a final, loving gesture from her son; even if the surrogate was a disciple her son loved.

"Woman, here is your son."

Well, she already had a son, thank you very much, and he was in the process of dying. She didn't need, or want, another

son to take his place. Being cared for and provided for is one thing. But being immersed in grief because your son is dying before your very eyes is quite another. That day at the cross, Mary, I am sure, wanted her son, Jesus. And she wanted him alive.

Joseph, we assume, was dead. She'd already lost him. She may very well have stood at his sick bed and watched him die. And now Jesus. The son whose birth had been a miracle. Her oldest. The preacher. The rebel. The miracle worker. The non-conformist. The one the whole family, including her, had once thought was crazy. The one they had tried to get to come home because he was an embarrassment to them all. The son of the special birth, whom she loved, but who neither she nor the rest of the family ever really understood.

And speaking of the rest of the family, where were they? Jesus' brothers and sisters? If they were there at the foot of the cross with Mary, why didn't Jesus entrust her to their care, which would have been both normal and proper. And if they weren't there with her, where were they?

Back in Galilee, shaking their heads at dear old mom, running off to follow their crazy, itinerant preacher/healer brother? Or maybe hiding out somewhere in Jerusalem with the rest of the disciples, afraid to show their faces in public for fear that they might be identified as followers (or worse, family) of Jesus and face prison or execution themselves? Where were those other kids when Mom needed them, we might wonder?

Yet even that, the whereabouts of her other children, was also probably far from Mary's concern that day at the cross. Grief and sorrow filled her life. Her son was dying, on the cross, before her eyes.

And Jesus saw her and said, "Woman, here is your son;" and he said to the disciple whom he loved, "Here is your mother." Jesus commended them to one another's care. ##

Our Lutheran service for the Burial of the Dead, our funeral service, begins with this declaration: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation, Who comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God."

And later in that same funeral service [LBW text] we pray in one of the petitions, "Grant to all who mourn a sure confidence in your loving care, that, casting all their sorrows

on you, they may know the consolation of your love." And in another we pray, "Help us...in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints...."

In the funeral service, in a time and place where we are filled with grief, and loss, and sorrow, and oftentimes feelings of loneliness and helplessness--in that setting God commends us not only to God's care, but also to one another's care; and, we pray that we may find strength in God's and in one another's care.

That doesn't remove the reality of death. It doesn't make everything o.k. It doesn't make everything easy. And at the time we may not even realize that care is being given, or received.

Yet at that time of death, that time of grief and sorrow in our own lives, the sustaining love, and power, and care of God do come to us and are at work in us and through us as we share that love, and power, and care of God with one another through hands that touch, and arms that embrace, and hearts that ache, and tears that flow, and words that speak of love, and sorrow, and caring for one another. #

Long before any of us began to do so, in a setting of death and dying, a setting of grief, and sorrow, and loneliness, and helplessness, Jesus commended two people whom he loved, and who loved him--commended them to one another's care in their time of need, their time of grief and sorrow.

Surely Jesus did not expect that doing so would make everything o.k. for them, that it would make that day any easier for them. But surely Jesus also knew that his own love for his mother and for this disciple would sustain each of them not only that day, but also in the days ahead as they shared his love and care with one another.

"Woman, here is your son.... Here is your mother." The sustaining, strengthening, comforting love and presence of Christ becomes a part of the hearts and lives of those who love him. And in loving Christ, and in experiencing Christ's love for us, we are commended by Christ to the love and care of one another.

My fellow disciples and lovers of Christ, look about you: here is your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, your sibling, your neighbor--in Christ. AMEN.

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GOOD FRIDAY--TRE ORE
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Fourth Word; Mt. 27:45-50

GOD DOES COME THROUGH

"God" is the title of a song sung by Tori Amos. The first line of the refrain laments, "God, sometimes you just don't come through."

In a similar vein in a song titled "Georgia Lee," a sad and poignant story of a young girl found dead in a small grove of trees, Tom Waits sings, "Why wasn't God watching? Why wasn't God listening? Why wasn't God there for Georgia Lee?"

Words like those could be, and in various forms often are, voiced by persons whose family member came home from war in a casket. Or by someone who's been abducted or trafficked and subjected to sexual abuse. Or by someone who's prayed fervently for a child or spouse to recover from cancer, a heart attack, or injuries suffered in a debilitating accident—but recovery didn't occur. Or by anyone anyone who's lost loved ones in a tornado, flood, or hurricane. Those words could come from the lips of many people in many and varied circumstances. And they have. and they do.

"Sometimes, God, you just don't come through." "Why wasn't God watching, why wasn't God listening, why wasn't God there for...?"

In a more agonized form those lines might have come from the mouth of the dying Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew. For that seems to be the feeling behind this 4th word from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

In Matthew's Gospel those are not just the last words spoken by Jesus before he dies, they are the only words spoken by Jesus as he hangs on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?...Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last." (Mt. 27:46,50). "God, sometimes you just don't come through." "Why wasn't God listening" to Jesus as those words formed on his lips with his dying breath?

Here in Matthew's account of the crucifixion there's no hint of a resurrection to come. This is agony. This is death—stark and real. This is Jesus overwhelmed by the powers of sin and death. This is a feeling of abandonment—stark and real.

Its not a pretty picture with which Matthew's Gospel leaves us. This is not a confident ending. This is not a note of solemn

joy. It is not a hopeful scene at the end of a bad day of suffering.

And, to make matters worse, it didn't start out that way at all. In its beginning, Matthew's Passion account presents us with a picture of Jesus not unlike the one we get in John's Gospel. A picture of Jesus who seems confident, in charge, in control.

Repeatedly in Matthew's Passion account, Jesus predicts and alludes to his coming crucifixion and death (26:2,12,18,21,29,31, 34,45-46,64). He speaks matter-of-factly of his impending death as revealing God's will and fulfilling the Scriptures (26:39-56). Jesus calmly tells Judas, "do what you have to do" (26:50). Jesus says he could call for legions of angels to rescue him, but that would not fulfill his task. Jesus is anything but a tragic figure, a victim of circumstances beyond his control, ignorant or naive about what lies ahead.

But that picture changes. It's almost as if the harsh and horrible reality of the whole business finally comes crashing in on him when at last Jesus hangs suspended on the cross, overcome by suffocation, with life slipping away.

Here we do not see the Jesus of Luke's Gospel with words of forgiveness to those who crucify him, with words of hope and promise to a fellow cross-hanger. Here we do not see the Jesus of John's Gospel who provides for his mother's care, and who utters words expressive of human suffering only (it seems) in order to fulfill scripture.

Unlike Luke's Gospel where Jesus dies after proclaiming confidently, "Father into your hands I commend my spirit." And unlike John's Gospel where Jesus dies with the confident declaration, "It is finished." In Matthew's Gospel Jesus dies in agony and loneliness, with a cry of despair and abandonment on his lips, feeling (it seems) that somewhere along the line something got screwed up and now things have gone terribly wrong. "My God, my God....sometimes you just don't come through." "Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last" (27:50).

In Matthew's Gospel, the frightening truth of the crucifixion, a truth which Jesus experienced in the depths of his humanity, is that at the moment of his death, overwhelmed with a sense of being abandoned even by God, Jesus could not see the resurrection yet to come. On the human level, which he shared with us, Jesus had been overcome and defeated. His death and his sense of being forsaken were real. ##

From our perspective on this side of the empty tomb, we know that Jesus' sense of being forsaken by God was just that--a sense, and not a reality. We know that God had not forsaken him. But Jesus' death was real, and because it was, and because God had not forsaken him, God had to make a new beginning. And God did. In the resurrection. God was watching; God was listening; and God was there for Jesus all the time. ##

God will not always do everything we ask. In this life evil, pain, suffering, and death will continue to be real and ever present. In this life truth, justice, mercy, and love (even the love of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth) will continue to take a regular beating, sometimes get trampled down, and sometimes be, or seem to be, defeated. And the feeling of being forsaken by God will continue, at times, to be all too real.

Which is why our hope does not lie in romantic optimism, or in the power of positive thinking, or in trusting in the innate goodness of humankind.

Our hope lies in God's power to begin again, to renew that which has been destroyed. Our hope is in God who does not forsake us, as God did not forsake Jesus, even when death happens, as death will; God who does not forsake us, as God did not forsake Jesus, even when we sense, even when it seems, that God has; God, who in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, gives us the confidence that God has come through for us, and will never forsake us, whatever life might hold.
AMEN.

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GOOD FRIDAY--TRE ORE
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First English, Austin
Fifth Word; Jn.19:28

I'M DYING OF THIRST

I remember saying it as a child, on more than one occasion. I'd come running into the house after playing outside, or, when I was older, after working. "Mom," I'd say, "give me something to drink. I'm just dying of thirst!"

We've probably all said it at one time or another--most likely as children, but probably, on occasion, as adults. "Man, I'm just dying of thirst!" And we'd proceed to chug down a glass, or two, or three of water, or a soft drink, or some iced tea, or gatorade, or a cold beer or two. "Man, that was good! I was just dyin' of thirst!"

Of course we weren't, really. We were a long way from death. But we were very thirsty. Our bodies were crying out for moisture. And both the primitive and the conscious parts of our brain responded to our body's cry.

For we know, both instinctively and consciously, that on this planet, given our forms of life, given the way organisms function here, that one can die from lack of moisture, one can die of thirst. Plants and animals dehydrate. Dry up and blow away. Cease to function. Cease to exist. Die. Of thirst.

Ask the farmers and ranchers, and even some of the city dwellers, in various parts of Texas who've suffered now through several years of low rainfall and a resulting water shortage. Drought. Plants and animals can't survive. Crops don't produce.

Or talk to the people who live in various parts of Africa that have suffered from years of drought. Where there is no water there is also little or no food. One can suffer greatly from lack of adequate rainfall and moisture. One can die of thirst.

Jesus' body was crying out for moisture as he hung on the cross. He wasn't dying of thirst. He was dying of suffocation, as, suspended on the cross, his body sagged and collapsed under its own weight. But his thirst was real. It was part of his dying. And it added to the agony of the breathlessness and to the physical pain Jesus was experiencing.

There wasn't much to be done about the pain and the suffocation. They were what death by crucifixion was all about--a perfectly awful way to die. But something, however small, could be done about the thirst. The parched lips. For that there was at least a partial solution.

The Evangelist doesn't tell us who responded to Jesus' cry, "I'm thirsty," by filling a sponge with sour wine, putting it on a reed pole, and raising it to Jesus' lips to give him a drink. It might have been one of the soldiers, or the centurion, or (with the soldiers' permission) one of Jesus' friends, or one of the other bystanders gathered around the cross. We don't know. And it really doesn't matter. It happened. And that's what's important.

It was a simple act of mercy, done for a dying man in the process of breathing his last. We shouldn't get upset about the sour wine that Jesus was given. Nothing mean-spirited in that. Sour wine was the common ration for the soldiers. It was the common drink of the poor folk. It's what would have been available there on a hot, dusty hillside outside of Jerusalem.

In our day it might have been a bottle of water, or iced tea from a thermos, or a Diet Coke, or gatorade from the cooler. There was no malice in the gift of the sour wine--it was the offer of what was available to one who needed it. An act of kindness performed for a dying man.

John, the Evangelist, who records this event in the crucifixion, also records another occasion on which Jesus asked for a drink. It was at Jacob's well in a city of Samaria, and the recipient of his request then was a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:1-30). Jesus used that occasion to tell the woman that he could offer her living water--water which a person could drink and never be thirsty again.

Spiritual water, nourishment for the Spirit, water for eternal life--that's what Jesus was talking about then. And that was the sort of water he seemed to be crying out for, wondering if he had been cut off from it, in the word from the cross before this one--"My God, why have you forsaken me?" That was spiritual drought crying out. That was spiritual thirst crying for spiritual water to restore what seemed to be a relationship with God which had dried up, blown away, on the cross. "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

But now the thirst was physical. Lips parched. A body aching for moisture. And in spite of the Evangelist author's

parenthetical statement that Jesus said "I'm thirsty" in order to fulfill Scripture (Ps. 69:21), I wonder if at that moment there was anything on Jesus' mind other than getting rid of his tormenting physical thirst.

"Give me a drink, please. I'm dying of thirst." We can understand that. A child can understand that. None of us has ever been crucified, but every one of us has been thirsty. Here Jesus is close to us, one of us, sharing our humanity.

At this point, in the midst of the theological mystery of the atonement which surrounds Jesus' crucifixion, at this point the mystery present in this word of Jesus, "I'm thirsty," is once again the mystery of the incarnation. This is the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, experiencing and sharing our humanity, crying out for something to drink to refresh his parched, dehydrated body.

On that future day when we will all stand before the throne of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ; and Christ speaks to us and says, "I was thirsty and you gave me a drink" (Mt. 25:35), his words will, I'm sure, have special meaning for a woman from Samaria who met Jesus at Jacob's well. And his words will have special meaning for another person who at a place called The Skull, just outside of Jerusalem, responded to Jesus' cry, "I'm thirsty."

But that moment will have special meaning for us, too. For to us Jesus will say, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink....(for) just as you did it for one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me" (Mt. 25:40). It is a simple, but profound, act of love and kindness. A cup of moisture given in the Name of the Word made flesh, who himself was thirsty.

"Please give me a drink. I'm just dying of thirst." AMEN.

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GOOD FRIDAY--TRE ORE
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First English, Austin
Sixth Word; Jn.19:29-30

IT IS FINISHED, SALVATION IS WON

"You can come down from the cross now," said the young girl with the long, golden hair said to Jesus. "You've done enough," she continued. "You've done all God wanted or expected you to do. You can come down from the cross now. Just decide to do it."

That, of course, is not from the Bible. It is, rather, a product of the artistic imagination of writer Nikos Kazantzakis. And it's the pivotal scene in Kazantzakis's book, and later his film, "The Last Temptation of Christ." It's not scriptural.

But there is a hint of it in Luke's Gospel in which the soldiers gathered at the base of the cross taunt Jesus: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Lk. 23:37); and one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus derides him saying: "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Lk 23:39).

There's an even more vivid hint of that temptation in Matthew's Gospel in which the crowd gathered at the base of the cross taunts Jesus with the words: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Mt. 27:40). And in Mark's Gospel the crowd, chief priests, and scribes all get into the act, calling on Jesus to "save himself, and come down from the cross" (Mk. 15:29-32).

But in the Gospel of John there is no hint of such a temptation. In John's account of the Passion neither soldiers, nor crowd, nor religious leaders, nor those crucified next to Jesus taunt him to save himself and to come down from the cross. Indeed, the picture of Jesus presented by John the Evangelist makes it clear that precisely because Jesus is the Son of God, saving himself by coming down from the cross is not something that could even enter into consideration.

Prior to Jesus' arrest, Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels all describe him kneeling in agonized prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking God, if it be possible, to remove the cross from his path. But not the Jesus of John's Gospel--you won't find that agonized, pleading prayer in John. Indeed, if one were

to read only John's Gospel, you wouldn't even know that Jesus prayed at Gethsemane.

In John's Gospel Jesus doesn't even give Judas a chance to betray him with a kiss: Jesus sees the soldiers coming to the Garden; goes out to meet them; asks who they're looking for; they reply, "Jesus of Nazareth"; and he tells them, "That's me." Whereupon they fall back in fear, and he asks them a second time who they're looking for. Again they reply, "Jesus of Nazareth"; and he says, "I told you before, that's me, so let these others go."

Jesus, as described by John the Evangelist, is not a betrayed, suffering, sacrificial victim. Not at all.

The Jesus of John's Gospel is clearly the Son of God, on a mission; fully in control of what's happening to him, knowing where he's headed, and with no thought, no desire, no temptation, whatsoever to turn back from the fulfillment of that mission.

And as Jesus hangs on the cross, says, "It is finished," bows his head, and voluntarily gives up his spirit and dies, he is declaring that his mission is now completed, the purpose for which he came has been accomplished.

And John's Gospel leaves no doubt as to the purpose of that mission: "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life....[God sent the Son into the world] that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3:16-17). That work of salvation for all, that mission of salvation, was accomplished, was finished, on the cross once and for all.

We're all familiar with things in our lives that don't get finished, that aren't accomplished, for whatever reasons. Perhaps because we're too young or too old, or because we get tired or bored, or we run out of time or out of energy, or we don't have the necessary commitment and determination to see it through, or we don't have the skills or the knowledge or the talent, or there are too many other conflicting demands, or the goal becomes too overwhelming, or whatever.

And as a result the house doesn't get painted, the career goals aren't fulfilled, the broken marriage doesn't get put back together, the marathon never gets run, the college degree never gets completed, the money never gets saved nor the time set aside to take that special vacation, we never become reconciled with children or parents or friends with whom we've had a

falling out. Lots of things in life (some critical, some not) don't get finished, are not accomplished, for whatever reasons, some good, some not so good.

The Gospel of John, however, proclaims to us that one thing in life and in history, the most important thing in life and in history, has been finished. God's work of salvation for us in the person of Jesus Christ is complete. "It is finished." The mission is accomplished. There is nothing more that God needs to do for our salvation. Christ's suffering and death completed the task, finished the mission, of restoring the broken relationship between God and humankind, and salvation is available as a gift from God to all who have faith. "It is finished."

But, oh, the price of it. John, the Evangelist, with his very theological, almost dispassionate, account of the passion, with his single-minded concentration on Jesus' mission--John shelters us from the suffering and agony of Jesus' death on the cross.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't do that. And in not sparing us from the horror of the crucifixion those Gospels remind us more vividly than does John of what it cost God in the person of Jesus to give us that gift of salvation: an agonizing death on instrument of torture.

But Matthew, Mark, and Luke's accounts of the crucifixion would be the poorer, too, without John's. For it is John, the Evangelist, who declares loudly and clearly, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that nothing could stand in the way of God's gift of salvation for you, for me, and for all humankind. And that Jesus' crucifixion, tragic necessity that it was, is the final proclamation that God's Good News is a reality. "It is finished!" It is accomplished. AMEN.

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GOOD FRIDAY--TRE ORE
April 18, 2025
First English, Austin
Seventh Word: Lk.23:44-49

FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT

If you've heard me tell this story before, because I have in another context, I beg your indulgence.

I stood at the bedside of a parishioner who was dying of cancer. His family was gathered there, alongside me. A few days before we had all shared the Sacrament of Holy Communion together. And we had talked about dying and about death. And being prepared.

On this particular day, about an hour before I found myself standing next to his bed, his family had called me. "Things aren't looking good. Can you come over?" And so we found ourselves encircling his bed, talking quietly to one another and to him, though his eyes were closed and speech came to him only sporadically, and then with great difficulty. Still, he gave indications that he could hear and understand us.

We prayed. And we read scripture. And we sensed the presence of God who understands our suffering because God has experienced and shares it.

And then, as we all reached out and touched this man, his family told him how very much they loved him. They told him they understood how much his cancer-ridden body hurt him. And they told him that it was all right for him to give up the struggle, that it was all right to let go, that it was all right to die.

His hand tightened briefly on those hands which held his. He nodded his head, and with some effort said, "Let's go. Let's go." In the midst of the pain, the suffering, the sorrow, the agony, and the emotion, it was a moment of deep love, deep trust, and deep confidence; as well as of finality. He died a short time later.

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The time had come. The struggle was over. And it had been a struggle for Jesus. A struggle that revealed itself in Gethsemane, and that surfaced again in the ugly torture of the cross.

When the Savior of humankind took the world's sin and pain into his own body and spirit, he did not receive it easily, nor

without complaint. He cried out in anguish. It was like a virulent cancer, eating away at his insides, destroying him--only thousands of times worse. Today, once again, we've heard his cries. Today, once again, we've remembered his agony.

It was possible for a person to hang on a cross anywhere from three or four hours to three or four days before death came. So for Jesus the time was comparatively short.

Fulfilling the role of the Good Shepherd he had described, the time had come to complete the task of laying down his life for the sheep. He stopped pushing upward from his feet to keep his chest in a position that would make it easier to breathe. He hung his head. And he died. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

In my mind I imagine an eerie silence wrapping itself around the place called "The Skull" as Jesus of Nazareth died. Darkness at mid-day must have had its effect. And the initial boisterous-ness of the crowd had no doubt subsided as the hours passed and the shock of the whole ugly business of execution began to settle in. Somehow it just didn't seem like a party anymore as the reality of three dying men began to sink in as the day wore on. Some of the crowd no doubt drifted quietly away, wondering why they had gone out to that hill in the first place, because in the final analysis it wasn't much fun watching people die.

But those who remained were eyewitnesses to the time when, for Jesus, pain, agony, and suffering merged into acceptance and release. Not unlike what happened that day as we stood around the bed of my dying parishioner. Not resignation, but acceptance and release. And with acceptance and release a certain confidence and peace that had not been present before.

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Trust and confidence that the promised victory would come. Trust and confidence that one is never alone in suffering; that there is no misery so great, no pain so sharp, that God does not join us in it and see us through it. Trust and confidence that overcomes the most desperate and agonized cry of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Moving into the dark, mysterious, unknown night of death, our Lord expressed his confidence and trust in the One who is Light. Not unlike the trust of a child who falls asleep in the darkness of the night, unafraid even though the night ahead and the world of sleep is an unknown mystery--unafraid, because of the knowledge that a loving parent is close by.

"Mother, Father, into your hands...." In some ways similar to "Now I lay me down to sleep...;" or, the prayer my sons learned many years ago as children and would pray before sleep came to them: "Dear God, I thank you for your care, you've been right with me everywhere...." "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

We sing those words, "Into your hands I commend my spirit," as part of the Lutheran liturgy of Compline, Prayer at the Close of the Day, or Night Prayer as it's called in the ELW. It's a service intended to reflect our last thoughts before we retire for the night. We don't get to use it often, because we're seldom gathered together at that time of day—though you can easily use it on your own at home.

In that context those words again are an expression of trust, confidence, and relief as we move into that time of the day when, in our sleep, we face the unknown, where we cannot see clearly, or anticipate, or respond as we do when we are awake. "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."

But it is a prayer not only for the time of sleep. It is also a prayer for a time of death, and as such it is also a prayer for life. Because Christ was able to commend his life to God at the last, we are enabled and emboldened to do the same.

When the compline of our life arrives, we can be confident that we will find peace at the last, as with hope and expectation we await the promised, and from a distance already heard, trumpet of the resurrection.

"[Sing] "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." [ELW p.323]
AMEN.

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