**Good Friday Reflection**

**Friday April 15, 2022**

**“Recalling the Last Words of Jesus”**

If the world’s a stage and we’re all players on it, many of us have an ideal picture of the way that we’d like make our final exit from that stage. We hope it will be peaceful and that we’re surrounded by our family and have a chance to say our goodbyes. We hope that we’ll be able to share some profound and memorable words with our loved ones before we go. Unfortunately, life does not always go according to plan and death can come very unexpectantly. Even when family can gather around to say their goodbyes, it is often difficult to say all the words that we want to say in those final moments.

 This makes me think of when my dad passed away back in 2006. He’d had a massive heart attack and was in ICU in the hospital. An early morning phone call let us know what was going on and so we quickly packed and made our way from Toronto to Owen Sound. After we arrived at the hospital, it soon became very clear that my dad was not going to recover from this and that he would likely die. A nurse gently spoke to him and asked if there was anything he wanted to say to us. There was a brief pause and he said, “I don’t want an autopsy.” This might seem like a rather strange thing to say, but you must understand that my dad was a very private man, and he didn’t want any more poking and prodding going on in his body, so his last request made perfect sense. For a long time, I wished that he had said how much he loved us or how thankful he was for us. But my dad was not a sensitive man who articulated his feelings in this way. Added to this was the difficulty he was having breathing, so talking was a challenge. In the end, I was thankful that we were with him, and that we got to say our goodbyes.

 On Good Friday we remember a death that had a profound impact on our world. We have heard various readings from the Gospel accounts of our Lord’s suffering and death, and we are invited to think deeply about these important words from Scripture. As we reflect upon his death, let’s contemplate the profound and memorable words that our Beloved Savior shared with those around him as he hovered between life and death. May his voice truly resonate within our hearts as we carefully listen to his last words.

• Jesus said from the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34).

 When Christ was crucified, he prayed these words to the Father. Much earlier in the Gospel, Jesus taught his disciples, “*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you”* (Luke 6:27-28). At this most painful and lonely moment in his life, Jesus clearly demonstrated that these were more than just wise words. He lived them out in the presence of all. In the face of the hostile actions taken against him, he prayed unexpectedly and graciously for his enemies.

 Jesus prayed for the Roman soldiers who crucified him because they were truly acting in ignorance. But he also prayed for his own people who rejected him and mistreated him. Even though he tried many times to open their eyes to truth, they failed to grasp it. Instead of calling down judgment upon the perpetrators of this horrible deed, Jesus prayed that they would be forgiven.

 The cross becomes a place of forgiveness for all, for all of us were once enemies of God and we have been reconciled to God through Christ’s death (Romans 5:10). At the same time, our Lord’s actions epitomize the Christian response to hostility; they teach us to love our enemies and to pray for them instead of getting revenge. Christian love and forgiveness stop the cycle of anger, revenge, hatred, and violence.

• Jesus said from the cross, “*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43).

 Jesus made this promise to a criminal who was crucified on the cross next to him. Crucifixion was a barbarous punishment that was reserved for the lower classes – slaves, criminals, and non-Romans. On that day two criminals were crucified with Jesus. As the scene opens, the leaders were taunting Jesus, “*He saved others. Let him save himself if he is really God’s Messiah, the Chosen One*” (Luke 23:35). The Roman soldiers joined in with similar derisions (Luke 23:37). Even one of the criminals hurled a similar insult at him, saying to him, “*Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* (Luke 23:39). But the other criminal knew better. He rebuked the other guy for his disparaging words against Jesus because he knew that Jesus was an innocent man. In his mind, they deserved this horrible punishment, but Jesus did not. While everyone else doubted Jesus’ true identity and ridiculed his power to save, this criminal reached out and put his trust in him with these simple words, “*Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom”* (Luke 23:42). In response Jesus said, “*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43). Jesus not only promised him deliverance from death, but also a close friendship to him – today you will be *with me.* No one is beyond our Lord’s reach, for even a crucified criminal received salvation when he reached out to Jesus in faith. God’s loving forgiveness was extended to a wrongdoer, sending a clear message of God’s love and forgiveness to everyone.

 The cross reveals God’s incredible love for us as the apostle Paul reminds us, “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8).

• Jesus said to his mother, “*Dear woman, here is your son*” and to the beloved disciple he said, “*Here is your mother*” (John 19:26-27).

 Not everyone standing at the cross that day was inflicting pain upon Jesus or hurling insults at him. There were some friends and family standing at the foot of the cross, watching in horror as the awful events unfolded before them. Looking down, Jesus could see them and in the final moments of his life he made sure that his dear mother was taken care of. In his dying moments he established a new family relationship, giving his mother a new son and his beloved disciple a new mother. While this story reveals the care that Jesus had for his mother, it also communicates a much deeper message – through Christ’s death a new family is formed. At the very beginning of John’s Gospel, we read that to all who believe in Jesus, he gives them the gift of a new birth into God’s family, the privilege of becoming a child of God (John 1:12-13).

 The cross is a place of reconciliation. The old divisions that plague humanity are erased as we are brought into a new family created by the loving sacrifice of Jesus. The apostle Paul reminds us, “*For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility*” (Ephesians 2:14).

• Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*?” which means “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mark 15:34)

 Of all the words of Jesus from the cross, these are the most unsettling. How could Jesus even think that God had abandoned him? Yet in his loud cry for help, we get a real sense of what Christ endured on the cross. The Gospel writer Mark paints a very grim picture of the events of that day. Abandoned by his disciples, mocked by the onlookers, and crucified on a cross, Jesus felt all alone. Added to this, darkness had enveloped the land from noon to three. In a real cry of pain, Jesus prayed to God for deliverance. It is fitting that he used the prayer language of lament from the book of the Psalms to articulate his thoughts. While Jesus was fully God, he was also fully human and the pain he felt that day was real. Surrounded by darkness and nearing death, he suffered alone. Jesus was not questioning God’s existence or God’s power to act. He was questioning the silence of God in this moment of intense suffering. His cry of abandonment directs us to the power of lament in our relationship with God. When we struggle with God’s silence, we don’t need to be polite and pretend that everything’s okay. We can bare our soul before God and cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

• Jesus said, “*It is finished*!” (John 19:30)

 In the end, Jesus knew that he had accomplished the work that the Father had given him. Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus declared, “*And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself*” (John 12:32). So, these words don’t express Jesus’ despair or frustration, but a calm assurance that he had fulfilled God’s mission on the cross. Thank you, Jesus, for your dedication to God’s mission and your obedience to God’s will, for through your sacrifice, you have drawn many to yourself to discover new life in you. May we be inspired by Christ’s example and desire to do God’s will. May we have the privilege of saying on our deathbed, “It is finished.”

• Jesus said, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*” (Luke 23:46)

 A beautiful aspect of many lament Psalms is their progression from intense complaint toward God to complete trust in him. We can observe this in the accounts of Jesus’ death. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus cried out the first line of a lament from Psalm 22, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” expressing his feelings of abandonment at the silence of God. Yet in Luke’s Gospel he calmly prayed from another lament Psalm, but this time it is a declaration of trust, “*into your hands I commit my spirit*” (Psalm 31:5). The lament Psalms aren’t simply occasions for us to vent our frustration toward God. More importantly, they are opportunities for us to work through our pain in the presence of God. Laments give us permission to express our deep sorrow and bewilderment at the difficult parts of our lives, but in the end, they invite us to place our trust squarely on God, the only one who can truly help us.

 On that tragic day when humanity engaged in horrible violence toward a loving God, our Lord experienced a range of emotions as he hung on the cross. His final words to us expressed his love for his enemies, his forgiveness of the sinner, his care for his family, his painful isolation, his completion of his mission, and his profound trust in God. May we all remember and reflect upon our Lord’s dying words this day and forevermore.