

## **THE 7 LAST WORDS FROM THE CROSS**

**“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”**

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Did you know that there was a time in the history of the Christian Church when there was great emphasis placed on the practice of “holy dying”, that is dying well? Death will come to us all, but most of us live our lives as if death does not exist. People are living longer than ever, and death is often partitioned off to hospital rooms, separated from our daily lives. Most of us find ourselves at a loss when death approaches. We don’t know how to die well.

Many of us learned as children that simple bedtime prayer: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take.” I learned this prayer as a young girl, and would sometimes say it with my father at night by my bedside as he tucked me into bed. I remember liking the first part, placing myself in God’s keeping, but not liking the bit about “if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take”. It almost felt like I was inviting death to come, just by mentioning it, and possibly even worse, welcoming it. I certainly didn’t understand what that prayer was saying as a little girl. I’m not sure I understand it a whole lot better as an adult. I must tell you, though, that through my experience as a hospice social worker, I have come to a better understanding of the process of death and dying. I think I have a bit less fear of it, and even can see opportunity for spiritual growth and deepening in relationship with God and others in the act of dying. I definitely know that death and dying is a mystery, and it is a holy process.

Of all the fears that trouble the heart of human beings, perhaps none is greater than the fear of death. It seems that all of our fears can be rolled up into this greatest fear – we are afraid to die.

We fear death because it is so final. We fear death because we are not sure what happens when we die. We fear death because it means leaving the world we know for another world we know nothing about from personal experience.

“The German Reformers of the Church taught that it was only natural for Christians to be fearful of death. Yet, they said, Christians did not need to gird themselves for spiritual warfare. Rather, the spiritual process of dying simply involved resting in the faith of Christ’s victory on the cross.” [*The Art of Dying*, Rob Moll].

Martin Luther wrote a sermon for a friend who was worried about his death. Luther said in his “Sermon on Preparing to Die” that the deathbed is a place to rest in Christ, not battle the forces of evil. This is a spiritual process, turning our attention from matters of this world to those of the next. The deathbed is the culmination of the Christian life, not its cataclysmic scene. Luther contrasted the “images” of death, sin and hell against life, grace and heaven. And Luther encouraged his followers to take communion as a sign which would remind the dying person “that Christ’s victory over the evil powers of death, sin and hell is also the Christian’s victory.”

This 7<sup>th</sup> and final word of our Lord from the cross - “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”, has much to teach us about dying well, which really should be the goal and hope for every Christian believer. Under the cruelest and most horrendous of possible ways to die, Jesus is able to “let go and let God”. There are several key reasons Jesus was able to do this.

First of all, Jesus was a man of deep prayer. This is one of the primary things the gospel writer Luke emphasizes about Jesus’ life. Jesus is praying right after his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descends upon him, and the voice from heaven says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Immediately after his baptism, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness – to pray and to be tested, to be prepared for his ministry. Luke describes Jesus often going off alone to pray, early in the morning at times, especially before engaging in acts of healing and teaching. The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, and Luke offers his version of the model prayer Jesus taught them, what we know as “the Lord’s Prayer”. During his life, Jesus nurtured and attended closely to his intimate relationship with God, his Father. Prayer kept Jesus grounded, focused, and deeply connected to God.

It makes sense then, that Jesus would die as he had lived – turning to God in prayer. Jesus’ first word from the cross, “Father, forgive them”, and this his last word from the cross, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” both begin with his calling out to God in prayer. And this final word, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” is actually a part of Psalm 31. It was one of the first prayers Jewish mothers taught their children, so it was quickly memorized, not unlike “Now I lay me down to sleep. . .” Listen to what comes earlier in Psalm 31, leading up to this Jesus’ last word from the cross: ***“In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.”*** (New Revised Standard Version).

Jesus dies the way he lived – praying to God, communing with his holy Father. And Jesus dies trusting. “Into your hands”, he prays. There had to be a sense of sweet relief to let himself go into God’s hands, God’s waiting embrace of love. With human hands, he had been beaten, slapped, crowned with thorns, whipped, nailed to the cross. The worst that human hands could do had done their worst to him. Why wouldn’t he want to be released into the loving, caring hands of God?

Jesus prays, he trusts, and finally he surrenders. In his living, he prayed. In his living he trusted. And now as his life is ending, he surrenders. So much of his life was all about learning to submit, to surrender himself to God’s will – that is, to the way of LOVE. All those days, weeks, months, and years of practice surrendering his will as he sought to follow God’s desire for his life and ministry. It now comes full circle as he surrenders to God in death. Just as he had done in life, he submits willingly to God in death,

knowing in whose hands he was held – for forever and always. I can imagine Jesus' relief at the welcome he would hear from God – "Welcome home, son". And his response, "Daddy, it's so good to see you again." That is the beauty of a relationship of trust, grounded in prayer, and offered in self-giving sacrificial love.

Jesus has taught us how to die well. There are lessons for all of us here in learning how to die well. Dying well requires preparation. It seems to be very true that the way we live – the attitudes and practices that shape us, also shape the way we will die. Dying requires getting clear about priorities. Jesus' temptations and challenges in his life and ministry were all about being clear about God's priorities. The dying process is a deeply spiritual event. There are spiritual tasks that call for completion – giving thanks, offering forgiveness and blessing, saying "I love you" and "I will miss you". Even as the body is shutting down in the dying process, the spirit is always actively engaged. Dying is to be actively undertaken. Jesus did his best to prepare the disciples for his death, both describing the form his death would take and acknowledging the actual fact that it was imminent. Dying is a public and instructive event. And like all deaths do, Jesus' death injures the human community. Death means loss and mourning. It means separation and absence. It feels to those left behind like there is a huge hole that cannot ever be filled.

And yet for the dying one, death is homecoming. It is not so much that relationships end in death, as they are changed. Death is the bridge for the next step into that larger, fuller life with God.

What a gift that even in his dying, Jesus teaches us how to die well – praying, trusting, surrendering to God and that larger life of love in God's eternal presence.

As these 3 days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday remind us, death is not simply an ending. It is the passageway ushering humanity into the beginning of a new life. There is no better prayer for one who is dying to offer than the one Jesus utters: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Surrendered in trust, confident of the sure and strong hands in which we are held, Jesus will guide and help any who follow his example, and in their own dying pray "God, into your hands I commend my spirit". It is the handhold we need and can grab onto as we cross the bridge from this known life, into the as yet unknown fuller life of love with God.

So today I pray for myself, for all those dear to me, and for you gathered here, that we all will learn from our Lord how to die well. Following his example, our living will be richer. Our dying will be confident in faith and bring peace at the last, trusting that the welcome into God's waiting arms will be joyous.

O Lord, teach us the art of dying. Teach us how to die well as your faithful followers, not fearing, but trusting. And thank you for showing us the way. Amen.