

## 1 Good Friday C (2 April) 2010

Psalm 31.5, "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

St. Luke 23.46, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." As he said this, he expired.

### **Good Friday**

**April 2, 2010**

Last words. Tradition holds them more meaningful than the rest, even inspirational—as though someone’s last expression, their final expiration were for those yet alive—a final inspiration, a meaning-full inhalation of another’s final exhalation. So from Luther, we inhale “We are all beggars;” from Thomas Aquinas, we take in “All my work is straw.” Or from the Confederate General T.J. “Stonewall” Jackson, expiring at Chancellorsville, we take in and ponder, “Let us cross the river and rest beneath the shade of the trees.” The famous fighting man expiring toward rest. But then T.J. Jackson always did rest at strange and awkward moments—and especially in the midst of battle. While armies raged, he slept; and while others either fled or fought in confusion, he stood like a stone wall. Still, Jesus (himself the rock) exhales neither soldierly valor nor tranquil rest, but childlike obedience to a faithful parent.

Jesus’ final words—whether a Psalm of lament (as in Mark/Matthew) or a Psalm of affirmation (as here in Luke)—come from anything but a stone wall. And especially here in St. Luke, the crucified Messiah, prays as an obedient child who, having done his work, having accomplished what he was called to do, commends his spirit—his life breath—into the hands of his father. This word, “father” troubling, perhaps, in an age of abuse—here suggests not one who manipulates, but one who waits and receives what at last is given: father as one who depends on the gift of a child.

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” With the exception of “Father,” the words quote Psalm 31.5 almost to the letter. The Psalm addresses itself to “O Lord,” or “O Lord, God of truth,” or “my strong rock,” “my crag and my stronghold”—terms of vivid imagery. God as rock, crag, and stronghold communicates protection, security, and rugged defense. Verse 7, however, rejoices in “your steadfast love,” a phrase suggestive of a personal relationship between the crucified Jesus and God as “father.”

Addressing God as “father,” the crucified Jesus employs personal terms, but not as we might. He doesn’t call God “Father” to gain any privilege, advantage, or power. We might imagine ourselves at the point of excruciating death, straining desperately to breathe and survive according to the body’s natural inclination. I imagine myself in such a state: begging for life, making deals, negotiating a reprieve: “Father, if you’ll only get

me out of this, I'll live a more faithful life, I'll do anything, be more religious, say my prayers, be more generous, care for my neighbors, be nicer to my wife. I'll even love the church."

Jesus engages in none of this. He asks nothing. He gives everything—even his final breath, his very spirit into the care of a waiting parent—God the Father all-suffering. Christ's final words are not a plea, request, or negotiation. The words reflect simple trust in God as faithful father, one who can be relied on to receive without reservation what Jesus offers. He gives what God is apparently ready and prepared to receive—his life, his spirit, his very being into the Father's control.

The Father sent him for this very purpose: to die on behalf of the whole murderous, faithless, and self-obsessed world. This he has now accomplished and, as such, he has no need of the life-spirit he hands over to the One Person he trusts—the Person of God the Father. Everything is accomplished, and he is now free to give up all *for our sake: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. As he said this, he expired.*

Lord Jesus Christ, by your death you have taken away the sting of death. Grant unto us your servants so to follow in faith where you have first led the way, that at length we may commend our spirit into the waiting hands of God, fall peacefully asleep in you, and at your call rise to live and serve you in all eternity—you who abide with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.