

Famous Last Words

The seven sayings of Christ as he hung on the cross are among the most famous of all “famous last words.” Perhaps only Julius Caesar’s astonished question, “*Et tu, Brute?*”, even approaches their familiarity. But a more appropriate set of last words for comparison to Christ’s comes from 17th Century British essayist Joseph Addison: “See how a Christian dies.” Better still, consider the last words of 19th Century American abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher: “Now comes the mystery.”

A mystery is not simply something we don’t understand. A mystery – from the Greek *mysteria* for “initiation” – is a secret. A mystery is something hidden, something whose true meaning lies beneath the surface which only the initiated can see. Mysticism is the search for those hidden meanings.

For example, consider Pilate’s words to the crowd calling for Jesus’s crucifixion: *Ecce homo*, literally “Behold the man” (John 19:5). On the surface Pilate is simply saying “Look at the man you want to crucify.” But on a deeper level Pilate is, like the Jewish high priest Caiaphas who said “it is better for one man to die than the whole nation” (John 11:50), unknowingly proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah. Pilate is fulfilling the word of the prophet Zechariah who used the phrase “behold the man” of the coming savior (Zechariah 6:12).

On a still deeper level Pilate is saying “behold *the* man” or “behold humanity” – look at what it means to be human. Behold *adam*, Hebrew for “man” or human being. Look at the new Adam – the son of Adam, or as Jesus called himself, the Son of Man – come to redeem the errors of the old Adam, the old humanity (Romans 5:12-21). *Ecce homo*: “Behold the true human being.”

But not only is Jesus the new Adam, the Apostle Paul also calls him the *last* Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). Jesus is end-point of history, the goal toward which all of creation is flowing, the completion of the human project. And the mystery that Pilate is revealing to us is that it is here *on the cross* that we behold true humanity. It is in Christ’s suffering that we see humanity in all its glory and potential. These are the last words of humanity: *See how a true human dies....*

Yet the mystery goes deeper. These are also the last words of God. Here we have seven *logoi* of Jesus – Greek for “words”, “reasons”, “statements” – to complete the ten *haddebarim* of Moses – Hebrew for “commandments”, “statements”, “words”. The Ten Commandments are not rules so much as descriptions of reality. God is saying this is how the universe works, so act this way if you want to live a happy and fulfilled life. But we didn’t get it. And so God had to take these commands, these words, and incarnate them – make them into a life of flesh and blood – as Jesus, the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14).

The mystery of Jesus – his hidden meaning – is that in his life, death, and resurrection God is revealing the true structure of the universe. This is not just what it means to be human; this is what it means to *exist*. Being is being-for-another. Here on the cross we meet reality itself. Here we meet God. *Now comes the mystery....*

Let us pray: *Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation, that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mysterious words, whereby you have given us life and immortality; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.
Luke 23:34

Jesus had an intimate relationship with God (John 5:17-8). Even as a child, Jesus knew God was his true Father. Luke's Gospel tells us that when he was twelve years old Mary and Joseph took Jesus on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-51). On the way home, they realized that Jesus wasn't with them. After searching three days, they found him discussing Torah with the rabbis in the Temple. When Mary scolded him for wandering off, Jesus replied, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

Here on the cross we finally see clearly what his Father's business was. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Having offered himself in obedience to God's will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world, Jesus now functions as our "high priest" praying on our behalf and asking his Father to forgive our sins (Hebrews 7:23-28). And, because of God's work through Jesus, we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God (Galatians 4:4-7). Like Jesus, we, too, can refer to God as *Abba* or Father. (Romans 8:14-17). God's business is to forgive us and reconcile with us through Christ.

It is in this act of reconciliation that we finally understand who God truly is. At the end of the story about the twelve-year-old Jesus, Luke comments that his parents "did not understand what he said to them." And we are just like Mary and Joseph: we have trouble understanding Jesus's words. Worse, we can be like those who crucified Jesus, those who did "not know what they are doing".

We don't know what we are doing unless we do it in service to Christ, the true *logos* – the true reality-structure – of the universe. In order to "know what we are doing", we must have a vision of the world in-light-of-the-end, what theologians call *eschatological* vision. Not until we know the end of the story can we understand the true meaning of the beginning and the middle. Until we see the whole map of history, we can't know where we are and where we are going.

This is why Jesus is able to forgive his enemies. He knows that by dying he will destroy death and take his place as the rightful ruler of the universe, that one day he will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:26-28; cf. Ephesians 1:20-23). Knowing this, even here in the shadow of the cross, Jesus relates to us in light of his vision of this final truth. And by learning to see the world in light of Christ's victory on the cross, we, too, can gain eschatological vision. We can come to know "what we are doing," where we are and where we are going.

As a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 1:9), brothers and sisters to the great High Priest, we may all be about God's business. We may all pronounce God's forgiveness on our enemies and live in the light of the end-to-come. As he was being stoned to death St. Stephen, the Church's first martyr, "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:54-60). And after having this mystical revelation of the way things are and will be from God's perspective, Stephen was able to pray like Christ "Lord, do not hold this sin against them".

Let us pray: *Almighty God, Father of mercy, grant us a vision of the glorious victory of your Son hidden in the darkness of the Cross and deliver us from fear, hatred, cruelty, and revenge that we may have the strength and courage to forgive our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.
Luke 23:43

Ancient Christian tradition says that Golgotha – the hill outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified – was also the burial place of Adam and that from his grave our first ancestor heard Jesus proclaim the re-opening of Eden.

God had created Adam and Eve to live in the Garden of *Eden* – Hebrew for “delight” or, as the rabbis called it in the Talmud, *Pardes* or “paradise”. The work of the first humans was to tend the garden in accordance with God’s word – God’s *torah* or “instructions” – trusting that God knew what is good and bad. But they rebelled, wanting to decide good and bad for themselves. Yet without orientation toward God – the ultimate Reality – they did not know how to live a happy and flourishing life. Ignoring God’s instructions, humanity was now trapped in a downward spiral of self-destruction. So, in an act of mercy, that they might not live forever in this misery, God sealed up the “Tree of Life” from them, sending them out of Paradise and allowing them to die (Genesis 3:22-24).

But God had a plan to rescue us from death. First through the Law, then through the Prophets, God called us to return. Finally God decided to write his instructions directly on the hearts of human flesh (Jeremiah 31:31-33). And so the *torah* of God “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), perfectly living out the life of trust in God that Adam had failed to live. By perfect obedience – obedience “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phillipians 2:8) – Jesus overcomes for us the legacy of Adam’s disobedience and death that we may instead inherit eternal life (Romans 5:19). Freely allowing his clothing to be taken from him and publicly ascending the cross, Jesus, in his nakedness, reverses the shame that Adam tried to hide with fig leaves (Genesis 3:7).

The cross, then, is the mystical reiteration of the Tree of Life in the center of Paradise to which Adam and Eve were forbidden access after their disobedience (Genesis 3:22-24; cf. 2 Esdras 8:51-52). As Christ hangs here on the tree his body becomes the fruit of which we may eat and live forever. At the same time, the cross is the mystical undoing of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad. Just as God told Adam about the tree that “in the day you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17), so God’s Son tells us on the new tree that “today” you shall live.

As God walked in the garden in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8), and as the Temple was the old location of God’s dwelling on earth, so now the living Church – with Christ as the chief cornerstone – is the spiritual house of the Lord (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-6). The Church – the place where Christ’s body is constantly offered as food for the life of the world (John 6:48-51) – is the new Eden, the new place of God’s dwelling with human beings.

Because of what Jesus did on the cross, we are *today* with him in the paradise of God’s presence.

Let us pray: *O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Woman, here is your son.
John 19:26

Jesus doesn't have a great track record with his mother. Once, when Mary came to visit him during his travels around Galilee, he refused to see her: "Who is my mother?", he asked (Matthew 12:46-48). Another time, at a wedding in Cana, his mother informed him that the hosts had run out of wine. But Jesus replied, "Woman, what have I do with you?" (John 2:1-4 KJV).

But both of these earlier scenes are mystically completed here on the cross. In Galilee Jesus had refused to single out Mary as his mother. He had said that "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:49-50). Once he went as far as to say we must "hate" our own parents (Luke 14:26) – though he only meant that we must love God infinitely more than we love them. We must be willing to leave our own homes and "let the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:18-22) while we live a new life. We must be "born again" into a new, spiritual family (John 3:3, 6). But if we leave our earthly families to follow Christ we will receive everything back "a hundredfold" through God's heavenly family (Mark 10:29-30). In short, the Church is a new family, the "household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). And here on the cross Jesus entrusts his mother to the care of his mystical family, the Church.

At the wedding in Cana, Mary had come too soon: "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). But now Jesus's hour has come (John 17:1) and he is at last being "lifted up" on the cross in order to "draw all people" to himself (John 12:27-33). It is by partaking of this body, broken for us, that we who are many thereby mystically become the one living body of Christ on earth (1 Corinthians 10:17; cf. 12:27). In the Church, Christ's body, Mary's son lives on.

Let us pray: *Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named, all praise and thanks to you for adopting us as your own children, for incorporating us into your holy Church, the family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; and for making us worthy to share in the inheritance of the saints in light; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Mark 15:34

Suffering is inevitable in a world addicted to self-destruction and blind to the way of life and peace offered by God. In a fallen world like ours, to be human is to suffer. And so when God became human in Jesus, then God, too, had to suffer.

Part of suffering is to feel forgotten by God. We feel that God is “hidden” from us, that we must have been “cast away” from the presence of God’s holy Spirit (Psalm 51:12). And so it is some comfort to know that Jesus understands this feeling of forsakenness. But it would be a mistake to think when we *feel* forsaken that we *are* forsaken.

The Psalms were the “prayer book” of the Hebrews, revealing their theology in practice. Psalm 139:6-7 says not even death can separate us from God’s presence: “Where can I go from your Spirit? . . . if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.” Likewise Psalm 16:10 says “For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit”. The Apostle Peter interpreted the latter Psalm as a prophecy of Jesus’s resurrection (Acts 2:24-28). It would be a mistake to think that Jesus didn’t understand this (see, for example, Matthew 20:17-19).

In fact, Jesus’s cry from the cross, while demonstrating that he understands what it feels like to believe one has been abandoned by God to suffering, is actually an affirmation of his faith that he is *not* abandoned. Jesus is quoting the first line of Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
and are so far from my cry
and from the words of my distress?
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer;
by night as well, but I find no rest.

But after these two verses of anguish, the Psalm continues in the next three verses to make a hopeful affirmation of God’s faithfulness:

Yet you are the Holy One,
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
Our forefathers put their trust in you;
They trusted, and you delivered them.
They cried out to you and were delivered;
They trusted in you and were not put to shame.

By quoting this Psalm from the cross, Jesus is mystically completing the Psalmist’s promise to “declare” God’s name to the people of Israel (22:21). In his act of dying for the sins of humanity, far from being forsaken by God, Jesus is announcing the faithfulness, mercy and justice of God, that God “does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty; neither does he hide his face from them; but when they cry to him he hears them” (vs. 23). And thus he is bringing it about that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord” (vs. 26).

Let us pray: *Gracious God, the comfort of all who sorrow, the strength of all who suffer: Let the cry of those in misery and need come to you, that they may find your mercy present with them in all their afflictions; and give us, we pray, the strength to serve them for the sake of him who suffered for us, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I thirst.
John 19:28

John's Gospel tells us that "when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth" (John 19:28-9). Traditionally the scripture Jesus is fulfilling has been identified as Psalm 69:21: "when I was thirsty, they gave me vinegar to drink".

But the mention of hyssop also suggests a reference to the Passover lamb whose blood was painted on the doorposts of the Israelites using a hyssop branch (Exodus 12:21-22). So if Jesus is the mystical completion of the Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7) who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), then what is the vinegar or sour wine?

Perhaps the vinegar is what we get when we try to produce wine on our own apart from the source of life (John 1:3). It is our own sour works of self-righteousness apart from the grace of God. The prophet Isaiah tells the story of how God planted Israel as a vineyard – a garden paradise, the new Eden – and expected it to bear good fruit. But it only bore sour grapes and became overgrown with weeds and thorns (Isaiah 5:1-6). Without good fruit, its vines were worthy only to be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 7:19), for the wine it produced could not satisfy anyone's thirst.

Earlier in the Gospel of John we hear another story about Jesus's thirst. While traveling through Samaria, Jesus came upon a well dug by Jacob – the man whose name was later changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28) – and asked a woman there to "Give me a drink" (John 4:4-7). Yet she had nothing to offer him but the sour wine of Israel's well. "If you knew the gift of God", Jesus told the woman at the well, "and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10).

This is what is happening on the cross. Jesus is turning wine into water, taking the sour wine of fallen humanity and purifying it with the Passover hyssop branch, transforming it into living water, "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). The waters of baptism which flow from the pierced side of the Savior mingle with the Eucharistic wine of his blood (John 19:34) – and in this fountain of living water we are purified.

Let us pray: *Most merciful God, who purges us with hyssop, that we may be clean; who washes us, that we may be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:7); give now the water of life to those who thirst for you, that they may bring forth abundant fruit in your glorious kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

It is finished.
John 19:30

Here on the cross, Jesus has finished his life's work. Jesus has finished – accomplished, completed – his mission to proclaim God's forgiveness and reconciliation to humanity. The night before he died, Jesus prayed to God these words: "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4). What was that "work"? He continued: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world" (17:6). This is Jesus's primary mission: to reveal the true nature of God to humanity.

The ancient Israelites worshiped the God Jesus called "Father", but they had not "seen" him for themselves (John 1:18). The Hebrew people considered the Temple in Jerusalem to be the physical dwelling place of God on earth. More specifically, God's home was in "the Holy of Holies", the inner sanctuary of the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. But this room was separated from the rest of the Temple by a thick curtain to protect sinful humanity from the perfect holiness of God. The people were not allowed access to God's presence.

But with Jesus – our Emmanuel or "God with us" (Matthew 1:23) – God has come to dwell personally with us now and forever. This is the mystical meaning of Jesus's saying "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Jesus's body is the new Temple (John 2:21) – one "not made with hands" (Mark 14:58) and greater than the old Temple (Matt 12:6).

Matthew's Gospel tells us that when Jesus cried out "with a loud voice and breathed his last", at the very same moment the "curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Matt 27:50-1). On the cross, Jesus is tearing down the curtain of the temple that separates us from God so that we no longer have to worship God only in Jerusalem but can now worship God "in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:19-23).

We now know what God is really like for we have seen him in the flesh. And what did he look like? He looked like a crucified Jew. It is in the vision of the crucified God that we are both judged and saved. By making God known to us, Jesus *judges* the world – though this judgment isn't judgmental: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). To say that Jesus pronounces God's "judgment" on the world is just to say that Jesus shows us what things look like from God's perspective – judging is showing us the *truth*, shedding light on reality.

But it is a painful truth: "this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). As "the light of the world" (John 8:12), Jesus himself is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). Only in the light of Christ can we know what true goodness is and only then can we know how we measure up. And in this judgment we are *saved* for only in the light of the cross can we see that the path toward God.

Let us pray: *Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, may deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow you (Matthew 16:24), and that as we walk in the way of the cross we may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.
Luke 23:46

His work completed, Jesus prepares himself to enter the darkness of the tomb and to await the next phase of the Father's plan. Here again Jesus turns to the words of the Psalms for solace and strength. This time, Jesus quotes from Psalm 31:5: "into your hands I commend my spirit."

With his last breath, Jesus not only entrusts his spirit to God, he also recites the words of scripture. Perhaps these are two ways of doing the same thing. To truly entrust your spirit to God is to allow God to do with it what he wills rather than what you will. It is to make your will and God's will the same – to be formed into God's image. And the surest way of imaging God is to take his word into your heart.

Jesus says that our words are a reflection of what is in our hearts. When talking about the Kosher food laws, Jesus says "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" (Matthew 15:11). He explains: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (15:18). So if you want to change your heart, you need to change the words which form it.

This is why Jesus says that the word of God is life itself: "One does not live by bread alone, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4, Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3).

Remember, too, the parable of the sower whose seed falls on various kinds of soil (Mark 4:3-8). When Jesus explains this parable to his disciples, he says, "The sower sows the word" (Mark 4:14). The word of God is like a seed that gets implanted in the soil of our hearts and grows to produce fruit. Therefore God says, "You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul" (Deut 11:18).

As we pass through the darkness of the Holy Triduum – the journey from the supper on Thursday through the cross on Friday to the tomb on Saturday – may we draw strength from the mysteries hidden in Jesus's final words. As we walk in the way of the cross, may these words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105).

And may we remember that whatever mysteries have been revealed to us, there are always more hidden meanings to uncover. The goal of mystical reflection is not to "wrap your mind around" these mysterious words; the goal is to wrap these words around your mind. Or better: to wrap them around your heart.

Let us pray: *Blessed Lord, let your Word be our light in the darkness and let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight (Psalm 19:14); you caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*