

'Famous Last Words' – Good Friday

by Rev. Robert Griffith

If you search for “*Famous Last Words*” on the world wide web, you will come across lists of people’s last words before they died. You will see Nostradamus, Elvis Presley, Marie Antoinette, Frank Sinatra, Benjamin Franklin, George Orwell, Steve Jobs ... and many other important people.

Interestingly, however, when I did this search, the person I was looking for was not listed. The one man who divided history. The man whose life and death we honour every time we write the date. The man who impacted humanity more than all the kings, princes, war heroes and celebrities combined.

That’s right, Jesus of Nazareth was not on the ‘famous last words’ list. And yet, in my opinion, His last words were the most profound, the most meaningful words ever to leave the lips of a dying man or woman. In fact, when we look at the seven statements which came from Jesus as He writhed in agony on that cross, we see the very essence of this amazing man and His world-changing mission on earth. So as we gather to remember that Friday which divides all of history, lets briefly examine the most profound, if not famous ‘last words’ the words of our dying Saviour.

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing”

After Jesus’ His mock trial, torture, the ridicule of thousands, the agonizing pain of a crown of thorns and the brutal way he was nailed to the cross ... His first response was forgiveness! He prayed that those who committed this vile act – those who murdered the Son of God - would be forgiven because they really had no idea what was happening here.

Jesus’ entire mission was one of forgiveness. The whole reason He came to earth was to deal with that barrier between us and our Creator God – that barrier being sin. In fact the very sin which those Roman soldiers were committing there and then – nailing an innocent man to a cross – was the means by which God would secure their forgiveness. And Jesus knew this. But His next words were even more profound ... they were addressed to the man hanging on the next cross:

“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise ...”

This exchange between the thief on the cross and Jesus is one of the most confronting narratives, but important narratives in the whole Bible. If you want to know how amazing God’s grace is; if you want to know how free our salvation is – then look no further than this conversation.

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Can you see what just happened?

This justly accused criminal turns to Jesus - after a life of sin and crime, He turns to the Lord and asks for mercy. That's not surprising at all. What is gob-smacking is Jesus' response. He says, "Ok. No worries – see you on the other side brother!" ... a loose translation of: "Today, you shall be with me in Paradise." And with those words Jesus slaps every devout Jew, and every pious, religious Pharisee right across the face! This man is a criminal. He has no right to ask God for anything. Of course he doesn't – that's the whole point!

This is what God's amazing grace looks like friends.

This is the heart and soul of Easter.

This is the gospel.

This criminal deserved only death – spiritual death for being born into a sinful humanity and physical death for committing whatever crime the Romans deemed punishable by crucifixion. He was getting what he deserved - but Jesus gave him what he didn't deserve – salvation and eternal life.

Now what amazes me is that here we have the most simple, powerful, profound example of someone coming into the Kingdom of Heaven on God's terms and yet religion, that vile stench in the nostrils of a God of grace, religion has, in spite of this profound story, complicated our salvation and our relationship with God by creating all kinds of religious hoops we have to jump through and prerequisites we have to fulfill in order to 'please' God or fit into the Church or be a good Christian.

What hoops did this scum-bag on the next cross jump through? Did he confess his sin? Well, kind of – he said he was getting what he deserved. But is there any evidence of repentance? Do we see a changed life? No! Was he baptized? Of course not. Well, there goes many of the Churches on the planet who make such a huge deal over baptism. Was there any evidence that this man was even 'converted' in the way most of the Church understand that word today? No – no evidence at all. There was no time to see any evidence – he was about to die.

Jesus didn't expect or require anything but faith from this man. No quiet times, no Bible study, no Church attendance, no qualifying period, no changes in his lifestyle before He accepted him – no, nothing! Jesus gave this low-life scum of society the greatest gift of all - totally and completely free!

This is grace. This is the gospel. This is why they call this stuff the 'good news.' Can you think of any greater news a human being could hear than this story? You were dead in your sin and God made you alive in Christ and it all comes to you free, by His grace. This story is why I do what I do. This is why we are here today! Amazing grace, how sweet the sound!

“Woman, behold your son ... behold, your mother”

None of us can even imagine how hard it was for Jesus, as the son of Mary when He left home to commence His mission, knowing how it would end, knowing how devastated his mother would be. Even if Mary was given some deeper insight from God about the road her son had to travel – which I believe she was – it didn't change the reality before her now as she stood beneath that cross and watched the baby she once cradled in her arms in a cave – now tortured to death and heading for another cave. The compassion which drove Jesus every day of His ministry on earth, is the same compassion which drove him to make sure His mother was ok just before He died.

“Eli, Eli, Lama, sabachthani ... my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

For over two thousand years now there have been millions of sermons preached and songs sung about the magnitude of what Jesus endured on the cross and most of that focuses on the weight of the world's sin which fell upon Him.

Of course that was enormous. Our minds cannot comprehend such a thing. All the sin of all mankind - past, present and future - falling upon one man at one point in human history? It's mind-boggling! Other sermons focus on the brutality of the crucifixion and the agony He endured on the road to the cross. But all of that pales in significance when we truly hear this fourth statement of Jesus from the cross and really understand what's happening here.

Worse than bearing the sin of the whole world, worse than the torture of dying the most agonizing death known to man at the time, worse than everything Jesus had endured to that point ... was the impact of His atoning death upon His relationship with His heavenly Father. At that time when Jesus was carrying sin of the whole world; at that moment when He was securing your eternal life and mine – His Father turned His back on Him. Why? Because sin and holiness cannot occupy the same space, any more than you can go forward and backward at the same time.

The whole reason Jesus had to come was because a Holy God could not draw close to His much-loved unholy children. He could no longer have the intimate relationship He always intended. So when the sin of the world fell upon Jesus that dark and dismal Friday – He felt totally forsaken by His Father for the first time ever. He knew this was coming, but He could never have anticipated the torturous agony and pain of separation from His Father. His intimate union with the Father for eternity was shattered at this moment as the sin of the world was embraced by Jesus. This was the only way our salvation could be secured and it cost Him everything.

“I am thirsty..”

Why is this significant? I think this one statement simply reminds us that Jesus was human. This was not some superman or a celestial robot. This was not a facsimile of a man who was impervious to pain or hunger or thirst. In order for Jesus to secure the salvation of all humanity, He needed to be 100% human and He was – to His very last breath.

“It is finished ..”

What is finished? His earthly life? His mission? His crucifixion? Maybe. But I think what was on Jesus' mind more than anything was the act of atonement – His mission as the Messiah. His responsibility was now over. Yes, the resurrection was coming, but that was in the Father's hands – nobody can resurrect themselves – not even Jesus. He was about to die in faith, trusting the Father to do what He had promised.

So Jesus proclaimed, *“Mission accomplished ... it is finished.”* There was nothing more He could do and when He said those words, He wanted them to ring out through history and across time to all peoples everywhere and to us today here in this room. It is finished! Once and for all, Jesus has done it! Jesus wants us to know that it was always His job to secure our salvation and reconcile us to God and that is job is done! It is finished. When we finally accept that truth and embrace its implications for us, then everything will change and, like Jesus, we too will be able to say,

“Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.”

When it was all finished, there was only one thing Jesus could do. Trust His Father. All Jesus had when He was on that cross is what you and I have: FAITH. Do you realize that today? He had no more assurance of life after death than we have. He trusted His Father to do what He said He would do. At that point in time Jesus could not see what would happen after His death. He believed the Father would raise Him from death and complete the Father's master plan by conquering death as well as sin – but He had no guarantee – He died the way He lived, by faith in His Father. So He committed His spirit into the Father's hands, confident that He would be raised on the other side.

When you and I face that same time at the end of our earthly lives, we should take heart and know that Jesus has been there first. He knows what it's like.

I'm not disappointed that Jesus didn't make it on to any of the 'Famous Last Words' lists I discovered because the last words of Jesus are the most profound and the most meaningful words ever to leave the lips of the man or woman and they define not only Who He was and is, but who we are, and will be in Him.

They cannot be compared to any words from any other man or woman and if you and I embrace those words and their meaning again today, Jesus will not have died in vain and we will truly be transformed by the Word of God, Christ crucified, our Lord and our Saviour.