

(Lights out)

Introduction

It's been said that a picture is worth a 1000 words. If that's true, then a mere seven words probably wouldn't give us much of a picture. Yet the seven words or statements spoken by our Savior from the cross present one of the most beautiful pictures ever...a picture that is, I pray, burned indelibly into our hearts as a reminder of God's astounding love for us. Our Tenebrae service this year is based on the Seven Words of Jesus spoken from the cross.

Luke 23:32-38

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

[The 1st candle is extinguished]

Meditation

It all began the night before. After instituting his holy Supper, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Shortly after, he would be betrayed by one of his disciples, denied by another, and forsaken by the rest. The Jewish Council arrested him and condemned him to death. They brought him to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, to carry out the death sentence since the Jewish leaders had no authority to do so. Pilate, knowing full well Jesus was innocent, sentenced him to death anyway. We have images inscribed in our minds from all the years we've heard this account: the taunting and mocking; whipping and beating; a robe of purple and a crown of thorns; massive nails driven through flesh in hands and feet; three crosses against the landscape of Golgotha.

We can only imagine how **we** would react to a situation like this: perhaps cursing at all those inhumane monsters carrying out this horrible violence; or perhaps just the opposite -- on our knees begging for mercy. Our human minds can almost understand either response! What's *hard* to understand is this first sentence of Jesus, these words spoken to those who even now were amused at his suffering: "**Father, forgive them.**" That's what this whole gruesome matter is about: forgiveness.... ..forgiveness for you...forgiveness for me...forgiveness for all. Forgiveness for our unending barrage of loveless words and actions that offend God and harm others. Forgiveness for our rebellious, selfish, egotistical attitudes.

God help us always to remember -- it was **our** sins that put Jesus on the cross. It would be **our** sins that needed to be forgiven. And it was **our** sins that would be forgiven.

(Lights on)

Hymn: #139 v. 1, 4, 5 (*Jesus, in Your Dying Woes*)

(Lights out)

Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

[The 2nd candle is extinguished]

Meditation

We don't know what crimes they committed, but they must have been very bad. Crucifixion was a regular form of execution in those days, but, generally speaking, to merit it, one had to commit a serious felony. These were a couple of bad eggs next to Jesus, and hard boiled ones at that.

At first they joined the rest of the crowd in mocking Jesus. After all, misery loves company. But soon one of them began to change his tune. Even though he was a criminal and was now paying for his crimes with his life, he was about to receive something far different than he ever imagined. He became a believer in Jesus. What caused it? No doubt a number of things came into play. First, he was afraid of death and appearing before God, his Judge. Before this, death was always "some day." Now it was today. Second: he must certainly have been stirred in his soul by the first words of Jesus asking forgiveness for his enemies. He saw the calm, caring, and thoughtful behavior of Jesus in the midst of agony. And third: the working of the Holy Spirit in his heart through Jesus' words performed in this lost man the miracle of conversion. At that moment he was snatched from the jaws of hell and given the priceless gift of everlasting life.

The criminal rebuked his partner, admitted his own sin, and confessed Jesus' innocence. Then he asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. He didn't ask for anything of honor. He knew he didn't deserve it. He merely asked to be remembered. He would receive far more!

Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Paradise! What a contrast to the hellish suffering of Calvary. That criminal was fully pardoned by the King. So are we. We have the same assurance that on the day we close our eyes in death Jesus will say to each one of us: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

(Lights on)

Hymn: #117 v. 1, 5, 7 *(O Dearest Jesus)*

(Lights out)

John 19:25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

[The 3rd candle is extinguished]

Meditation

So often when we are suffering we focus all our attention on ourselves. Even though others around us may also be suffering, we usually dwell on our own issues and problems. Not so with Jesus. In the midst of his distress he saw the anguish of his mother standing at the foot of the cross. Certainly any mother would be broken-hearted as she watched the torture and death of her son, even if she knew he was a convicted criminal on death row. But Mary knew her son was innocent.

Jesus provided for her care. His friend and disciple, John, was there. He said, "Dear *woman*, here is your son." Yes, Mary was his mother, but she was also a woman, a human like all the rest of us. Contrary to what some teach, the truth is that Mary was also a sinner who needed a Savior. Her son was that Savior, the Savior of an entire world of sinners. She realized that Jesus was dying for her, too. She would shift her emphasis from knowing Jesus as her son to knowing and believing that Jesus was her Redeemer and giver of everlasting life.

Jesus' friend John would now take care of Mary as his own mother. What a wonderful account. Yes, we see here a son's concern for his mother, but even more importantly, we see a Savior's concern for a precious sheep in his flock.

(Lights on)

Hymn: #105 v. 1 & 5 *(O Sacred Head, Now Wounded)*

(Lights out)

Mark 15:33, 34

At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

[The 4th candle is extinguished]

What happened at the cross is truly a mystery beyond our understanding. It is impossible for us to grasp fully everything that Jesus endured for us when he spoke the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God's plan of salvation was so comprehensive, yet so simple. Because we failed again and again to live up to God's standards, God sent a substitute -- someone to do it for us. Jesus was the perfectly obedient One.

Yet that was only half the story. God's perfect justice demanded that every sin be paid for: anger, hatred, lust, arrogance, indifference, greed, envy, discontent, gossip and all the rest. Multiply those sins by the thousands of times we commit them, and then by the billions of people who do so every day, and we begin to see what Jesus had to suffer for. And no one ever suffered more.

Physical suffering? Yes, it is possible that others have been tortured in their bodies more horribly than Jesus was on that first Good Friday. But the most horrible pain Jesus endured was suffering rejection in hell. God the Father turned his back on God the Son so that you and I would never be forsaken eternally in hell -- where fire is not quenched and worm does not die.

Darkness covered the land for three hours as Jesus suffered an agony we can't begin to describe or comprehend. He went from enjoying the perfect love of his Father to no love at all. Why? Because he loved us. Marvel at what Jesus endured for us! Even though we have left him out of our lives so many times, look at the cross and remember that this is how much he loved us. Ponder it and ask: "How can my life ever be the same again?"

(Lights on)

1:00pm hymn: #98 v. 1 & 5 *(Jesus, I Will Ponder Now)*

7:00pm Choir: "I See a Rose in the Garden"

(Lights out)

John 19:28, 29

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

[The 5th candle is extinguished]**Meditation**

One thing people often take for granted is the depth and magnitude of the agony that Jesus suffered on the cross. Our minds are tempted to say, "Well, Jesus is God, so beatings and crucifixion really didn't hurt him." To think that way would be a tragic mistake and misunderstanding on our part.

Jesus is God. He always was God and will never cease to be God. Yet Jesus "humbled himself" and chose not always to use and display the power and glory he possessed as God. We call it Christ's humiliation. Our Savior took on himself servanthood. Imagine that! The God who created an incredibly magnificent universe and gave his creatures life in it, became his creatures' lowly servant. But it *had* to be that way in order for Jesus to carry out God's plan of salvation.

This fifth statement of Jesus clearly displays his true humanity. The excruciating hours on the cross had taken their brutal toll. Baking in the hot sun, deprived of hydration, and with great loss of blood from his wounded veins, Jesus understandably was thirsty. Not only did this show his utter humility, it fulfilled prophecy. On Good Friday alone, at least 32 prophecies recorded in the Old Testament were completely fulfilled as promised.

"I am thirsty." The brevity of this sentence speaks volumes. The Lord in his humility and love endured terrible thirst that he might become for us a Fountain of Living Water.

(Lights on)

Hymn: #120 v. 1-2 *(What Wondrous Love Is This)*

(Lights out)

John 19:30

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

[The 6th candle is extinguished]

Meditation

Few things give us satisfaction like finally completing a project that we had to get done, especially when it is done for the benefit of others. But nothing can give us greater joy than the completion of God's plan of salvation for the eternal benefit of our souls.

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, we were in terrible trouble with no way out. We could not possibly stand before a holy God and escape damnation in our sinful condition. So our gracious God promised a Savior. He made good on that promise in the person of Jesus. For 33 years Jesus was perfect and for 6 hours he suffered on the cross. He never wavered. He had a mission to complete and, with steeled determination and steady love, complete it he did. It was finished. It is and it remains finished.

All of that was done for us...to wipe away our sins...to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west. Even though we confess that we "daily sin much," God no longer counts our sins against us because of the powerful, cleansing flood of Jesus' precious blood. The gift is priceless.

At the death of Jesus, the heavy curtain in the temple in Jerusalem was "rent in twain," torn in two from top to bottom. No longer would we need priests and sacrifices. Jesus, the Great High Priest, had offered himself on the altar of the cross as the one, perfect Sacrifice: one time, for *all* times, for *all* people. God's righteous wrath was completely appeased and Satan was utterly defeated. Because of Jesus, all is right between God and us.

(Lights on)

Hymn: #138 v. 1, 2, 4, 5 *(Oh, Perfect Life of Love)*

(Lights out)

Luke 23:44-46

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour,⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

[The Christ Candle is removed]**Meditation**

Going home. How inviting the phrase "Going home" sounds to the soldier deployed far away from his or her family, to the student or businessman away for a long time, or even to any of us after a long day of work when we're just plain tired out. Going home.

So it was with Jesus. Our salvation was gained and assured. The time was near for the Son to be reunited with his Father in heaven. But first, in order that all would be fulfilled, Jesus would have to die. He prayed to his Father, committing himself into his loving hands, and breathed his last.

Before the Friday evening sun set and the Jewish Sabbath began, two men, members of the ruling Jewish Council, asked Pilate for Jesus' body and took it down, battered, limp, and lifeless, from the cross. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea quickly prepared his body for burial with whatever linens were on hand. They carried it to Joseph's own gravesite, cut in the rock.

In that tomb they placed the body of Jesus, the Lamb of God, pure and holy, and sealed the sepulcherwith a large rock.

Total Darkness

The loud noise!

Moments of silence

The Lord's Prayer (still in the dark)

(Lights on)

Hymn: #119 v. 1 & 3 *(Were You There)*

(Lights out)

Luke 18:31-33

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. ³² He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. ³³ On the third day he will rise again."

[The Christ Candle is returned]**Meditation**

Many people finish the history of the One named Jesus with his burial in Joseph's tomb on Friday evening. Throughout the ages people have tried to keep him in that grave and seal it tight. But the light shines. Men have tried to put out that light. Satan has tried to put out that light. Death has tried to put out that light -- but to no avail. The light still shines and the Holy Spirit keeps that light shining in the hearts of his people.

Having trembled at the heart-wrenching and emotionally-draining descriptions of Christ's suffering and death for sin, we turn our thoughts now to "the third day." Jesus predicted, more than that, Jesus **promised** that he would rise again; that the grave could not hold him. Our hearts pound with anticipation of the celebration of Jesus' stunning victory this coming Sunday morning, when the light of eternal joy will overwhelm our thoughts, and light of life will drench us in the glory of the resurrection.

Until then, may go about our lives in these trying times on earth humbled at the reminder of the price of forgiveness our sins required, yet assured that Jesus, our Lord, paid that price willingly for us all. Be of good cheer. We live each moment today and forever in that loving Savior's hands.

Blessing: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor, and give you peace. Amen.

(Lights on)

Closing Hymn: #125 v. 1 & 4 *(When I Survey the Wondrous Cross)*

(A few lights on very dimly on so people may exit...)