

The Last Word



This is the San Damiano Crucifix which tradition tells us is associated with Saint Francis.

According to the story the image of Jesus spoke to Francis telling him to rebuild his Church.

The young man took him literally. The church of San Damiano was in need of repair and so he set to work.

We understand that the call given to Saint Francis was much greater; not so much as to repair a building in Italy but to put right the Church of God which was in need of some attention.

If we look closely at the Crucifix we can see in various places there are angels: three in each arm of the cross. It is as if they are there to support Jesus.

faint traces of angels at the bottom of the cross who may be looking up in worship.

at the top a whole gang of them, they seem to be witnessing Jesus going up to heaven – a hand at the very top represents the Father welcoming his Son as he accomplishes the work of redeeming us.

On the left-hand side of the body of Jesus are Mary, his Mother and Saint John. On the right are two other women and a bearded man – probably Joseph of Arimathea.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Crucifix is the face of Jesus. His eyes are open and he looks quite calm. This is no tortured Christ on the Cross it is one who looks out at the world and speaks to us even as Saint Francis heard the voice of Jesus.

It calls to mind a devotion of this time of the year – the Seven Last Words. Seven times the Gospels tell us that Jesus spoke while he was on the Cross.

The Seven Last Words

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



Betrayed, mocked and made to suffer terribly; the reaction of Jesus is extraordinary. Most of us would be consumed with the pain and terror; torn by bitterness and humiliation. Perhaps even seeking revenge.

Jesus asks his Father to forgive his executioners. The remark is recorded not just to tell us that Jesus wanted to forgive the Roman Soldiers but that they did not realise who it was they were crucifying.

When he says 'forgive them' he means you and me. The crucifixion expressed the sin of everyone and it takes an act of faith to realise that it was 'my sins' that nailed Jesus to the Cross. The Lord wants me to recognise this and to understand he forgives me.

'They do not know what they are doing' includes me, meaning I don't fully understand what I am doing; no matter how serious my sin, he forgives me.

2. 'Today you will be with me in paradise' Luke 23:43.



It is so easy to join in the condemnation of others especially when it seems to say that we are all the same and that the 'great and good' are, in fact, as guilty as we are. That same secret delight makes us fascinated by the failings of the famous.

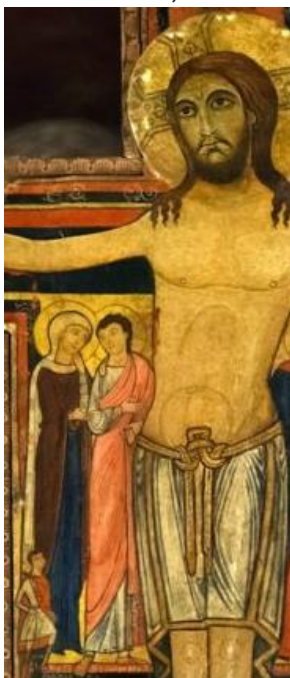
The story of the Good Thief reminds me that pulling down others from their pedestals is futile and unworthy.

The promise that Jesus made is uttered in the midst of terrible pain and suffering. When someone assures us that all will be well we can feel that these are glib words said because they are disconnected from us and do not face up to the truth that life is awful and then you die.

But Jesus is no bystander looking on the sufferings of others and spouting platitudes. He is in the depths with us and it is while he shares with us our hardships that he promises to rescue us.

The Good Thief must still die and his suffering does not disappear because of what Jesus says. But Jesus says that no matter how bad it can get, in the end he will win and he will help us.

3. 'Woman, behold, your son! Behold, your mother!' John 19:26-27.



Jesus entrusts his Mother and the beloved disciple to each other's care.

These are some of his last words directed to those he loved deeply and show that he wanted them to carry on, no matter what happened.

It is a message to all his disciples, including you and me, that we are to see a connection between us that is as deep as the bonds of family. It is an idea to be remembered especially in times of difficulty.

There is a particular meaning to these few words that has a special resonance for us. The relationship we have with our mothers is one of the most profound we experience.

Jesus commends Mary to us all, inviting us to see her as our Mother.

It is to her that we turn for that motherly care and love when we are in need. In the great prayer that we learn as children we ask her prayers for our present needs and for greatest challenge we must all face – 'now and at the hour of our death'.

4. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Matthew 27:46

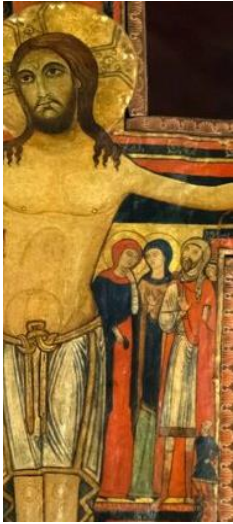


Sharing our condition, Jesus experiences the depths of suffering. Loneliness and abandonment makes suffering so much worse. There is a difficult idea that we all skirt around. Even when surrounded by our loved ones, we seem to die alone. It is on our own that we step into the unknown. These words tell me that he knows how that feels.

There is something reassuring that he knows precisely what I face.

There is more, in truth we do not die alone. Only one can accompany us through death and beyond and he is there to hold safely on that journey those whom I love.

5. 'I thirst.' John 19: 28.



The expression of thirst reminds us of the discomfort Jesus experienced as death approached. Many of us have sat by the bedside of a loved one moistening their lips as death approached. I can see in this dryness and thirst a profound connection between the suffering of my loved one with the suffering of Christ. My simple act of love is something that draws me close to the Passion.

There is another meaning in these words.

We are told them by Saint John to make me think of how Jesus thirsts for us all. The whole purpose of his coming, his ministry and his death were to draw us closer to himself and to his Father. He thirsts for each one of us. I may see myself as unnoticed and unregarded but Jesus has a deep desire to be one with me.

And the mirror reflection of this is my thirst for God. Every soul is made to be fulfilled in love and that love is made perfect in the family of the Trinity. We were made for God and our thirst will only be satisfied when we are together.

6. 'It is finished' John 19:30.



This can be seen as a comment that his life has come to an end. In this Jesus shared the common experience of us all. The finality of death can be so challenging to those who have faith. It is when confronted by such a raw fact that faith is tested.

Some see the moment of death as simply the end. It is at this moment that I am called to recognise what faith really is.

For many of us it's not a glowing certainty that clouds the mind and helps us avoid reality.

Faith keeps me going in the midst of the harshest experience. It is at times like this we pray with the father of the boy whom Jesus healed 'I do have faith, help the little faith I have.' (Mark 9:24)

The seventh is, 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit,' Luke 23:46.



These are words drawn from Psalm 30 and have been said by many over the centuries especially in face of suffering and death. They represent an act of trust that God will take care of us. They are appropriate for us to say at the end of the day as we go to sleep and they are the right words to say in times of difficulty.

As we face the worry of our present situation we pray, perhaps on our own, commending ourselves to the care of God.

The Lord Jesus was able to do this at the moment he crossed the threshold of life into death. He invites us to journey with him in our lives and in our deaths always placing ourselves in the hands of God.