

**The Seven Last Words of Christ**  
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## **The SECOND**

The Magi saw *three* trees against the low horizon. The second word of Jesus from the cross acknowledges the other two.

You understand the difficulty of saying anything at all when you are hanging between earth and sky by your hands and feet nailed to the tough wood. I'm not sure we yet understand what pressures this puts on the chest, lungs, shoulders, ribs, on the entire human frame. And the pain, surely the pain we can only guess at, and miss by a long stone's throw. How, with such agony coursing through every muscle and along every nerve, could anyone think of any thing, much less speak? And the pain only grows worse as the minutes pass.

Two criminals, two thieves crucified with Jesus, one on his left, the other on his right; *one* of them hanging there covered Jesus with abuse, and said, "Are you not the Christ? Why don't you save yourself – and us?" a question asked, not out of belief or trust, but out of his anger, anger at his being caught, condemned, and crucified, but even more angry because of the pain. We hear no admission of guilt, no cry for mercy, but denial and anger. Very frequently denial and anger gather in the heart and mind as reactions to pain, whether physical or psychological.

Anger, of course, solves nothing, although it may bring temporary relief from pain and frustration by distracting from the cause. Somehow we must work our way through our anger, flush it out of our system. That can be done by venting it on others, as the wicked thief does, or turning our anger inward, venting it on ourselves. But none of that solves anything, nor does it bring absolution. Anger is only a reaction. How does the wicked person, thief or otherwise, react on seeing the just? Psalm 112

tells us, "The wicked man sees and is angry,/ grinds his teeth and fades away."

On the other hand, consider these lines from Psalm 95: the psalm, borrowing the voice of God, speaks of the Israelites in the desert, where "they challenged me and provoked me,/ although they had seen all of my works./ Forty years I endured that generation./ So I swore in my anger,/ 'They shall not enter into my rest.'"

*Righteous anger*, that is the label we give it. But it strikes me that, righteous or unrighteous, anger is anger, and therefore, when we come to judgment, rather than, "I swore in my anger, 'They shall not enter into my rest,'" I would prefer, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

With considerable relief, then, we can turn to the good thief, who rebukes his partner in crime, not out of anger, but out of simple, justice and compassion. But is it not strange how these occasions work themselves out? The unjust anger and abuse of the bad thief produces this truth, this just reaction, this wisdom, even: "Are you not afraid of God at all? We are getting the same punishment as he is, but in our case we deserve it; we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong."

"From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks," says the Lord, and, "By their fruits shall you know them." So be it. Here we have an apple right off of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

We have a series of steps here: truth, justice, wisdom, and then on to faith. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Faith is a gift we know. Not a virtue we work on and achieve, but a virtue we must first receive as a gift outright. Here, on Golgotha, here at the crossroads of history, here on this low hill

crowded with three crosses, a handful of faithful followers, a band of spectators, soldiers, and members of the establishment to witness the execution, here there is still room to make, still time to give, this gift. By its fruits shall you know the gift; "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

An ancient tradition claims that the cross of Christ was raised at what used to be the center of the Garden of Eden. Hence the Cross, or rather Christ on the Cross, becomes the restored Tree of Life: The tree of life my soul hath seen,  
Laden with fruit, and always green:  
The trees of nature fruitless be  
Compared with Christ the apple tree.

Even before the Passover is completed, God gives us this sign of a harvest abundant beyond all telling, "Behold, this day you will be with me in paradise."