

The Seven Last Words of Christ
Reflections by Fr. Paul S. Naumann, S.J.
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The THIRD

“Women of Jerusalem, do not weep over me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.” One of Our Lord’s final words, but not from the cross; earlier (as you know), on his way through the streets of Jerusalem, on his way through the streets of Constantinople and Rome, on his way through the streets of every city, town, village where sinners dwell. St. Peter, so the legend goes, St. Peter leaving Rome, giving up in discouragement and disgust, met Jesus going in, Jesus, the Truth and the Life, dragging his cross along the Way through the gates into Rome.

Sooner or later we all meet him carrying his cross, and perhaps weep for ourselves and for our children, and, perhaps, like Simon of Cyrene, are delegated to help carry.

Where did Mary meet her son on that sixth day of the week, the day on which God created men and women, Eve and Adam, whose children line the streets of Jerusalem, whose children scourge and crown with thorns, whose children cry out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Whose children we too are. We do not know where or whether. How did she make her way to Golgotha? And when did she arrive? Before the fixing of Jesus on the cross? Or afterwards? We do not know.

I know that I could not watch an executioner crucify anyone. Even when I contemplate the events of Good Friday, there are parts when I have to turn away. I can hear the hammer strike the nails, but I cannot watch. The gospels tell us only what we need to know, economically, reverently. The gospel of John merely tells us, “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother.”

Our blessed Lord, looking down, could see her standing there, a widow about to be deprived of her only child, and her last visible

means of support? Probably not. There was extended family still living in Nazareth; there was Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in Bethany. These we are sure of; there may have been others. But Jesus still has a mind of his own, although how he could make contact with it through agony untold and unimaginable is more than I can fathom. Nevertheless, provide for his mother he does, committing her to the care of the beloved disciple, "Woman, there is your son."

In view of the circumstances, this strikes me as an act of consideration almost miraculous: exchanging, in his mother's life, a dying son for a living son. "Here is your mother." And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home.

"In view of the circumstances," I say, but the real circumstances are not on view; they are hidden from sight. We must recollect them in faith, bring them to light, or we will misread the sign at this crossroads.

What makes these seven last words so important? Why do we rescue them from the noisy cries and jeers of the spectators? Because they are the words of God, because Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, and this turning of Word into person without losing a syllable, this Incarnation took place in the womb of the woman standing beneath the cross. Mary, as T. S. Eliot says, is "the place of impossible union where past and future are conquered and reconciled in incarnation." Mary, of course, is not just a place, but the very source of bone and blood so fractured, splintered, spattered and spilt, the very source of the flesh sagging from its own weight against the fixation of the nails.

Mary, mother and maid, becomes the mother of us all when we are united to Christ, her son. That is why she comes to be the figure of the Church, because we are all one in Christ, members of His

Body. Furthermore, in this way Mary becomes the new Eve, the new mother of all the living.

The original Eve stands in the shattered garden, the apple still in her hand. Picked from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and already tasted, she offers it to each of us. No need. We have already tasted, and found it sweet on the tongue, but sour in the stomach.

The New Eve likewise stands in the garden, amid the ash heaps and refuse of the City. She too holds an apple in her hand, which she offers to each of us. It may, for a time, be tart on the tongue. Ah, but inside! The apple, round and red as a bubble of blood, she has picked from the Tree of *Life*, from the tree of everlasting life, from Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.