

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

“The Word of God, proceeding forth/ Yet leaving not his father’s side,/ And going to his work on earth/ Had reached at length life’s eventide.”

Eventide, what a lovely, gentle word, a restful word even, to be used for such a turbulent, violent, occasion. Already death rattles at the door and twists the knob violently, but Jesus holds the door until he is ready. There remains just one thing to do: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Then he opens the door and passes through.

At that very moment this scene, with its three trees against the low sky, passes into stained glass windows in all the cathedrals of Europe and the world, the crucifixion with sunlight streaming through it in red and blue, in purple and green and gold, striking the image into the hearts and imaginations of countless Christians. Painted on walls it is, and carved out of wood in church after church and in chapels too. At that moment the cross is woven into every vestment, whether black, purple, green, white, or red, and at the end of every stole.

At that very moment Jesus takes up his cross once again and drags it down every city street and alley, across every square, down every country lane, down every road, and onto every highway; he drags it down every hospital corridor, through every ward, through every orphan asylum, nursing home, assisted living pavilion, and rehab center, through the refugee camps of Darfur and the Sudan, through Buchenwald and Dachau, and into every prison, including Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, and drags it into both towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Like it or not, with this cross comes the knowledge of God.
“Knowledge of God,” I am quoting Karl Barth, “Knowledge of

God is not an escape into the safe heights of pure ideas, but an entry into the need of the present world, sharing its suffering, its activity, and its hope. The revelation which has taken place in Christ is not the communication of a formula about the world, the possession of which enables one to be at rest, but the power of God which sets us in motion."

The knowledge of God, combined with faith, sets us, not in rest but in motion: the interior, invisible motion of prayer; the exterior motion of liturgy, with its songs of praise, its processions and gestures, with its table-altar that brings the sacrifice close, and closer, so that with and in Christ our motion, our work can assist with his work, can follow along his way, and can let him lead his life within us.

But what kind of life is this? "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," the last, the final word, followed by the inevitable, by death. God, however, is not the God of the dead, but of the living. That heavy, awkward cross, rough-hewn, thick, resistant to hammer-blow and nails, is an instrument of death, soaked in sweat and blood, Nevertheless, planted firmly in the earth and raised above the crowds of nations, tribes, and peoples, that terrible wood sends down roots thrusting into the well-springs of grace, and puts out shoots, green bubbles of buds, twigs, branches, and they grow; they are feathered over with leaves until the cross becomes, by the creative design of God, the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life my soul hath seen,/ Laden with fruit, and always green:/ This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,/ It keeps my dying faith alive;/ Which makes my soul in haste to be/ With Jesus Christ the apple tree.

{Note: "*The Tree of Life my soul hath seen...*" is originally an 18th century English poem & carol which has been set to music by multiple composers. The version used here was composed by Elizabeth Poston (1905-1987).}