

Father, Into Thy Hands I Commit My Spirit

Five days. Five days from Palm Sunday to Good Friday. How quickly everything had changed. On Palm Sunday, the crowds had welcomed Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem as their king, with the waving of palm branches, and songs of “Hosanna!” “Hosanna!” it means “Save now!” “Hosanna to the Son of David!” The people recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the descendant of King David, as the king who would rule forever. The promise of the prophet Zechariah was being fulfilled:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is he,
Humble and riding on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

Palm Sunday was a day of joy and triumph.

How quickly everything had changed. The religious leaders had plotted to arrest Jesus on Thursday evening as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He had been condemned to death by the Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate. Now, on Good Friday, Jesus was dying an agonizing death, crucified between two criminals. During those terrible hours, he spoke 6 times:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

To the criminal crucified beside him: “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.”

To his mother, Mary: “Here is your son.” And to his disciple, John: “Here is your mother.”

Some time later: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

“I thirst.”

“It is finished.”

At noon, the light of the sun failed and for the next three hours, the earth was covered in deep darkness, just as the prophet Amos had written:

“On that day, says the Lord God,
I will make the sun go down at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning
and all your songs into lamentation...
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,
and the end of it like a bitter day.” (Amos 8: 9-10)

Then, Jesus spoke one final time: “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” And he breathed his last.

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Powerful words... powerful words on Good Friday... and powerful words for us today, because they help us understand what it means to truly welcome Jesus as King.

You see, it’s fairly easy to welcome Jesus as King on Palm Sunday. The sun is shining, the crowds are celebrating, there’s excitement in the air, everything is right in the world. On good days like that, we see God’s blessings all around us. We are ready to make Jesus the king of our lives, the king of the world.

But on Good Friday, the earth is covered with the darkness of sin & despair. We know about darkness in our lives. We’ve experienced darkness—the darkness of our failures, the darkness of our fears. Our lives have been plunged into darkness by a family problem, a medical diagnosis, a financial crisis, a broken relationship, a struggle with addiction, a painful loss, deepest grief.

In times like these, Jesus' words from the cross guide us: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Jesus' last words are a prayer. They are from scripture; a direct quote from Psalm 31:5. They are words that every Jewish child learned as a bedtime prayer: "Into thy hands, I commit my spirit" (a lot like we teach our children, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...").

However, Jesus added a word to this prayer. He added the word, "Father." "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Here we see the depth of the relationship between Jesus and God above. Throughout his life, Jesus turned to God, as his Father. Remember Jesus' words at age 12, when he stayed behind at the temple in Jerusalem, and Mary & Joseph searched for him for 3 days, how Jesus said: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) And in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed, "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." (Luke 22:42). Jesus taught his disciples to begin the Lord's prayer with the words, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." And he told the parable of the Father who welcomed home the prodigal son.

Now, with his last breath, Jesus turned to God, his Father, with a prayer of complete trust, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." And then, he died.

How can this prayer guide our lives? How can these words make a difference—especially when we face times of deep darkness?

First of all, as we've seen, this is a prayer to the Heavenly Father. A prayer to the Heavenly Father. How amazing that God wants us to call him, "Father"! God who created the heavens &

the earth, who is from everlasting to everlasting, yet he wants us—each one of us—to come to him as naturally as children come to their parents. We know this because of something that happened when Jesus died.

In Luke 23:45 we read: “the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” What exactly occurred? This curtain was a large woven cloth 10 yards wide and 10 yards tall. It completely covered the entrance to the most holy room in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies. Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and only the high priest, was allowed to enter into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. But when Jesus died, this dividing wall between God and humanity was torn in two from top to bottom—not by man (then it would have been torn from bottom to top), but by God (from top to bottom). Jesus’ death opened the way to God. Before, our sins separated us from God, as surely as the Temple curtain separated the people from the Holy of Holies. But, now our sins are forgiven, and we can come to God. We can truly know God as our Heavenly Father.

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” There is a second thing here: it is a prayer of decision. A prayer of decision. There are many things we can choose to commit our lives to: we may be committed to our job, to school (well, probably not this week, during Spring vacation), we may be committed to a sports team, to earning a living, to our family, to our friends... many worthy objects of our dedication. But the most important commitment is the decision to trust our lives into God’s hands. This week during Holy Week, as we remember Jesus’ death on the cross for us, we have a decision to make: Will we turn our lives over to him, trusting him as our Savior and our Lord?

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” One more thing to note here. This is a prayer to be repeated daily... a prayer to repeat daily. Each time we say this prayer, its meaning goes deeper into our hearts. We are able to place more of ourselves into God’s hands, to experience more of the peace and assurance that comes from trusting him.

I think of the story of a 3-year-old girl. It was her mother’s birthday, and her family had a tradition for gift-giving. Their mother sat in the living room, in her favorite chair, with the family gathered around her, and one-by-one, each family member went and out and returned with a wrapped gift for her on a silver tray. First, some jewelry from their dad. Then, a beautiful new sweater from the oldest daughter. The next oldest had found a new game that he thought the family would enjoy playing together. The twins had gotten her a box of candy. Everyone had a gift, except of course, the 3-year-old. However, she wasn’t going to be left out. When everyone else had finished, she took the silver tray, went out of the room, came back in... She put the empty tray down on the floor in front of her mother’s chair. Then, she stepped onto it and said with a smile, “I give you me.”

“I give you me.” That’s what it means to pray daily the prayer of Jesus, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

So today on Palm Sunday, we welcome Jesus as the king of the world, the king of our lives. And we follow his example, putting our complete trust in God, offering our lives into God’s hands: “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”