

“Father, Into Thy Hands...”

From the series: The Seven Last Words From the Cross

Text: Luke 23:46

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Into Thy hands I commit my spirit," Jesus' final words as Luke paints the picture for us. This last word is a word of trust. For John, the last word was a word of completion; for Mark, followed closely by Matthew, the last word as they recorded it, a word of abandonment. For Luke, a word of trust. "Father, into Thy hands I commit or commend my spirit." The one who was conceived by the Spirit and baptized by the Spirit and ministered in the power of the Spirit now returns the spirit to God Who had given life in the beginning, and the cycle is complete. The last word in Luke's picture is a word of trust.

You have perhaps sensed by now, as we come to the last of the seven words from the cross, that John's picture stands out by itself. Matthew, Mark and Luke are closer to each other. Mark, the earliest, is followed closely by Matthew. But there is some significant distance in Luke and the picture is different; it has a different feel. In Luke, the whole story is softened a bit. In the Garden, the observance of which we are here tonight to celebrate, Jesus prays the same prayer in Luke's account as in Matthew and in Mark, and then is ministered to by an angel who strengthens him. He prays more earnestly and sweats, as it were, great drops of blood. But there is missing, in Luke, that phrase about Jesus' soul being wrenched within him. For Luke, in the Garden there was no breaking of that constant communion with God, or that succor, supplied here by the angel of God. And then on the cross, Luke's Jesus gives us a most powerful witness to the good news of the Gospel. The three words of Luke, "Father, forgive them ...," "Today Paradise," and finally this word, a word of trust, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

That trust was not a cheap article. It was not the consequence of sunny skies and smooth seas, birds singing and all well. It was a word of trust that issued from one that was in the midst of Hell's darkness, without a scrap of evidence that everything that he had banked his life on was true. Jesus, to me, is believable, not because he was so full of confidence and went about with such great certainty, but because of the very vulnerability of his faith. His trust was not the trust of the religious fanatic who has no questions, only answers, sure and simple and

certain. No David Koresh here. No Jim Jones. No Bible-thumping, finger-pointing TV evangelist here. This one trusts in the darkness with fear and trembling. That's why I believe him. That's why I would follow him. That's why I would trust him, because he finally is able to still trust in the darkness.

"Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Luke is citing Psalm 31, verse 5, a different citation than the one Mark gives us, "My God, my God, why?" which comes from Psalm 22. Here in Luke's picture we have Luke's conviction that this one who found no scattering of his night and no alleviation of his pain and no answer to his question died in trust, nevertheless. And that is perhaps as powerful a witness, as powerful a statement of good news as I have to share with you any time. For this trust is a trust that is unmovable. It is a trust in spite of everything. It is a trust that will not let go. It is a trust that finally issued from one who had lived in trust and died in trust, with the mystery and the terrible suffering still intact.

He died. There's an old Lenten hymn that says "Learn of Jesus Christ to Die," and well we might. Death is something that we face, all of us, as we lose those we love, or as we come to the point of our own terminus. Death, I learned over ten years ago, is a matter that presses for some answer, some primal need in the human breast, no matter how far one may be removed from religious practice and faith. I learned it in the fall of 1983 when I went to the University of Michigan where Hans Küng was lecturing and holding a seminar, and I saw that great secular university flock to the largest hall on campus to hear this man read a lecture for two hours on the subject of death and judgment and purgatory and heaven and hell and whether there was really eternal life. And I thought to myself, no matter how sophisticated we become, no matter how far we may be removed from childhood faith or religious tradition, finally we humankind must die, and we know it, and we wonder about it, and every once in a while it erupts upon us and we must face the fact that we will die.

The hymn says, "Learn of Jesus Christ to Die," and well we might. Death was never a terribly fearsome reality for me personally, if I may tell you my story tonight. It was because, I suppose, of my father being an elder and I being a child that came along lately, some would stay a mistake, some would say a surprise, nonetheless when three sisters had been raised and gotten along with their lives, I was still there to be dealt with and so I was dragged around to everything that my parents went to. My father was an elder, and so I went to every funeral home in the city. It seems like every Sunday night we were at a funeral home. Somebody would die in that congregation, and my father always went. Death was so much a part of life. One Sunday night I remember going to a couple with whom my parents were very close. I called the lady Aunt Jenny. I didn't realize how ill she was but, while we were there, she died. I remember my father taking me by the hand, taking me into her bedroom, and there she lay on her bed, eyes wide open, breathing no more. The minister came, and the funeral director was called, and I was a little child in the midst of all of that. I remember another

occasion, as a teenager, coming to my grandparents' home to pick up my parents. It was also a Sunday night it seems, and I came into the house and my grandfather had died. The clan was gathering. At some moment everyone gathered around, and my father led us all in prayer. Death was very much a part of life, but death was very much set in the context of a deep trust in God.

As a young seminarian I preached one Sunday night on the air in Holland, Michigan, at a city-wide hymn sing. It was a service that was broadcast live. A good friend of mine had lost a little child to leukemia. It was a tragic loss and a great sorrow, but the child had died so beautifully with a vision of angels, and I told that story. And, as young preachers are wont to do, I generalized the experience and made as though it was a rather simple thing for everyone to die beautifully. The next morning one of the faculty members came to me and said, "I heard you on the radio last night," and I said, "Oh, how nice." And she said, "My father was a marvelous Christian man," and I said, "Oh." She said, "He died a terrible death." And I said, "Oh." I knew what she was telling me. I learned that one ought to be very reticent about the way one speaks about departure from this life, and one ought to be very loath to generalize the way in which that will happen for others. Nonetheless, it didn't change my basic conviction that it is possible for us to "Learn of Jesus Christ to Die," and to deal with the reality of our mortality in a context of trust that will stand us well in the whelming flood.

I loved the prayer as a child, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray Thee Lord, my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee Lord my soul to take." I understand there's a Revised Standard Version of that now. I called my granddaughter Stephanie tonight and I said, "Steph, tell me your bedtime prayer," and she said, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray Thee Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee Lord my soul to take." I said, "Good. You pray it just like Bumpa prayed it." I am not a child psychologist, and I recognize that there may be certain appropriate stages of a child's development when it is more appropriate than at other stages to introduce certain concepts, but my experience would tell me that in childhood it is possible to wrap death in such fundamental trust that one will never forget it and will be able to carry that into one's final moments. I prayed every night, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray Thee Lord, my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee Lord my soul to take," and I'm a bit embarrassed to tell you this next thing, but when I grew and, long after the time when I began to formulate my own prayers upon retiring, I always concluded with my childhood prayer. There was something about that word that spoke of the ultimate trust, a way through which to go in one's day, and a confidence with which to pillow one's head through the night.

And I tell you that not simply to bare my soul to you tonight, but because Psalm 31:5, "Into Thy hands I commit my spirit," was the "Now I lay me down to sleep" of Jesus' day. It was the Hebrew child's bedtime prayer. In fact, it was the last petition of the evening prayers for the Hebrew people. So when Luke portrays for us the final word of Jesus, he gives us the prayer that Mary taught her son when

he was a child when she tucked him into bed. The word he would have recited as he drifted off to sleep was, "Into Thy hands I commit my spirit."

The only word that Luke adds to that prayer is that intimate word of address, "Father." "*Father*, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." And then he died. A final word of trust. If there is anything that we can take away from this I would think it would simply cause us to redouble our efforts and our commitment as parents and as grandparents and as a community of faith to recognize that it is those very earliest impressions imprinted upon the mind of the youngest child that travel with us through all our days. And if those impressions are impressions of trust, then even death, when wrapped in trust, loses its fearsomeness and becomes for us the possibility of movement from life through death to life, which is eternal. The hymn says "Learn of Jesus Christ to Die." Well might we learn that, to trust in the beginning is to be able to trust in the end, and then there is nothing, nothing, finally, that we need fear.