

"FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT"

Good Friday, March 29, 1991

Luke 23: 44-47

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God is dead. That is what the theologians Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul van Buren proclaimed in 1966. Time Magazine devoted the cover of one issue to the question, "Is God Dead?" Due to the publicity of these views, people expressed opposition with bumper stickers: "If your God is dead, try mine"; "God is not dead, I talked to Him this morning."

The truth is, that on Good Friday in the year 29 AD, God suffered and died. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." In Jesus' suffering and death, "God bears in his heart all the wounds of the human family."

Clearly that day on Golgatha is a dark day in human history. It is the day that human beings executed God's symbol for all people. As Ernst Becker noted, those who watched the death of God's son came to experience the pleasure of their own survival as they watch the prolonged dying of another. Jesus' closest friends, the disciples, have run for their lives. He predicted that they "will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." (Mark 14:27)

However, as we look closely at the drama of death as Jesus breathed his last breath on that day, we can see the game is not over.

I. DIED AS HE LIVED

There were signs that this was just preparation for victory over death. The first sign is that Jesus died as he lived. Jesus' words, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," sums up the death of Jesus, but also sums up His life. As his robe was woven of one piece, so was his life one with the Father.

You might have noticed that Jesus' word is a prayer. Jesus was a man of prayer whose actions were one with the will of the Father. He prayed in the garden, Father, "thy will be done." This was the way he taught us to pray, "Thy will be done as it is in heaven." Even on dark Friday, Jesus was a winner for he lived his life in spirit of prayer and oneness with the Father. He was a winner because he died as he lived.

All of us die as we live. As a minister I have been present to many who were dying. I realize that when we consider our own dying, it makes us anxious, particularly when you feel you have more things to experience. But I have talked to many who lived a life of prayer. They lived life in

touch with the Transcendent dimension. As they lay on their deathbed, they were ready to meet God. God had been a friend all their lives and now they were going on a journey to meet an Old Friend.

But that's not always true. Clovis Chappell tells a story of a man who made himself famous in the restaurant business. He established restaurants all the way across our continent. When at last he reached the end of his earthly journey, those nearest to him gathered about his bed to hear his final words. When they bent over him to catch his last whisper, it was this: "Slice the ham thin." There was nothing wicked about such a final word. It just means that this was the ruling passion in his life and his death.

The tradition surrounding funerals is to go soft on the guest of honor, although he or she might have been a terrible scoundrel. The humorist Lewis Grizzard told of a funeral for a man in his home town who died just like he lived. Loot Starkins, as Grizzard described him, was a miserable old tightwad who beat his dogs, growled at small children, wouldn't go to church because he despised people, and, on top all that, he was a Republican. Struggling to say a few kind words about Loot, the minister offered, "We should all remember we can find some good in everybody."

A man stood up in the back of the church and replied, "Loot Starkins didn't have a good bone in his body. He owed me a hundred bucks and I know damn well the old fool died just to get out of paying me."(p.58-9) We die as we live and leave behind a legacy that can be inspiring or not so inspiring. We might ask our loved ones if we died tomorrow, how will they remember us? We might be surprised.

Secondly, Jesus was not only a person of prayer but one who touched people's lives. He died as he lived giving the power of love to those who were near. Even his final words on the cross are remembered and recorded; they were that powerful. The centurion was so awed by the power of Jesus' words that he pronounced Him innocent of all charges.

Without a doubt, the centurion had seen hundreds of crucifixions. He felt anger and rage as the prisoners cursed him when he gave the order to drive the spikes into their wrists. But this Jewish teacher was different. He didn't even cry out or curse when they drove the nails. He never even uttered a word, not even a groan. What self control, what courage! Even the bravest of men screamed when the hammer fell.

When his foul-mouthed soldiers laughed and joked as they rolled the dice for the man's finely-woven robe, the victim looked on them with compassion. This made the centurion ashamed, ashamed of himself and of his men. The writer of Mark's gospel could very well have been correct when he has the centurion proclaim the true identity of Jesus. "Truly this man was the Son of God." Jesus touched the very depth of his soul.

II HE RETURNED HOME

No doubt there were many people to attend the crucifixion that day. Some probably brought a chicken salad sandwich and a skin of wine along because a crucifixion could go on for hours, if not days. For many of the spectators attending, an execution was just something to do. They were living very boring lives and they needed something to break up the boredom. Executions were the afternoon movie matinees of 29 AD. But this was a matinee in which the robbers of life only appeared to win. When Jesus died, he won because He just went home to the Father.

Many of you are aware that our oldest son, Mark Jr., studied for a semester in Australia.. During his absence, we talked to him on the phone, collect by the way. He wrote to us telling us about his experience of camping in the "Outback." He shared with us about waking up in the morning with wild kangaroos standing around them. He told those stories over the phone and in his letters, but those stories were more exciting when he told them again after he came home. Being together made the difference.

Jesus went home to the Father and that was different. We refer to Jesus' last words on the cross as his confident word. He was confident of the fact He would be home with the Father.

There is a story about a family whose two story house caught fire. The family-father, mother, and several children-were on their way out when the smallest boy became terrified, tore away from his mother, ran back upstairs. Suddenly he appeared at a smoke-filled window crying like crazy. His father, outside, shouted to him: "Jump, son, jump! I'll catch you." But the boy only cried:

"But, daddy, I can't see you." "I know," his father called, "I know. But I can see you." Confident, the boy leaped into his father's arms.

Confident, Jesus also leaped into His Father's arms. You would expect a Son to do that. How many times have you had your child climb up a tree, crawl out on a limb and yell down to you, "catch me." And you caught

them. You wouldn't dare let them fall. Nether did our Father who is in Heaven.

As I stated a moment ago, I have observed many as they face their own impending death. When the barriers of denial are finally broken down and the person accepts the enevitable, they begin to put their affairs in order. First, they take care of business needs such as wills and they might decide who will inherit that picture or this piece of furniture. Then if there is something they have always wanted to do like take a trip to Europe or whatever it might be, they do it. Most of all they go to see family and old friends. This is just to say good-by for now. When they have checked everything off the list, they say what Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished."

Then they wait for that moment to leap into the arms of God. Many times I have seen that come very quickly after they have completed their work. They were ready for a family reunion in that place not made with hands. That is when we experience true victory.

CONCLUSION

I started this reflection on Jesus' last words from the cross with the story of the Death of God theology. This theology was born in 1966 due to the thought of Altizer, Hamilton and van Buren. It is ironic that the Death of God theology sprang up in 1966 but it died abruptly in 1968, never to be resurrected again. Jesus died on Friday but He destroyed our death through His resurrection.

The Symbol of God's love died on Friday, but Sunday's coming. It was Friday the cynics were saying that you can't change anything in this word; but that was Friday and Sunday's coming. It was Friday, and on Friday, Pilate thought he had washed his hands of a lot of trouble. The Pharisees were strutting around, laughing and poking each other in the ribs. They thought they were back in charge of things, but they didn't know that it was Friday! Sunday's Coming! That is the day redemption was won. Amen.