

Into Your Hands

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, April 1, 2010)

Today we would call Crucifixion a “cruel and unusual” means of execution. History tells us that criminals were sometimes nailed and sometimes they may have been lashed to the cross and then only died of exposure after days or maybe even more than a week on the cross. Onlookers, who would often come and go during the time of crucifixion, could easily see and hear different things taking place. Matthew, Luke and John all record different words that Jesus spoke from the cross.

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

“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

“Woman, behold your son, behold your mother.”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“I thirst.”

“It is finished.”

Tonight we turn to Luke for the end of his account of the death of Jesus, and for the seventh word spoken from the cross. Luke 23:44-46 ⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.

It is a child’s prayer – we’ve all heard it, maybe we taught our own children to say, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” It seems like such a nice little prayer, until you stop and think about it: “If I should DIE before I wake...” Oh, that is so morbid. We would rather not think about that, and certainly we don’t want our little ones to be frightened about dying while they go to sleep. In fact, there is now a modern, less frightening second line to this prayer, which goes: “Guide me safely through the night; wake me with the morning light.” But maybe we need to pray the original version. Maybe we all need to be a little more aware of dying, knowing that our death will come, and asking ourselves how we will deal with it.

When Jesus hung on the cross he did not need to pray, “IF I die before I wake...” There was no IF involved any more. After the beating, the flogging and the torture, being nailed to the cross was the final torture, and he could probably sense that the end was near, very near. He was going to die before he would waken again, and so he prayed, “Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I commend my spirit.”

“Father, into YOUR HANDS...” he prayed, because by this time, his own hands were helpless, as ours will be some day. Those hands that conveyed incredible power and healed the sick, so that a touch restored sight, healed the deaf, cured the lepers, now were powerless. Those hands that blessed and broke the bread so that a multitude was fed were now too weak to hold on to his own life, let alone bread for others. Even the hands of others, who loved him and worshiped him and served him, were now helpless, as all our hands will be, when death draws near.

But there were, and still are, hands that have power, power that can overcome even death. Hands that took the dust of the earth and created man still had power. Hands that brought the people of Israel through the torture and slavery of Egypt still could save, as God said to Moses, “Is the arm of the Lord shortened that I cannot save?” Hands that are opened to us, as the Psalmist writes, “...to satisfy the desire of every living thing,” can still fulfill the promise of new life, eternal life, with God. In God’s hands, all the other words spoken from the cross reach their fulfillment. The one who had called on the Father to forgive can call to God to be received, trusting that it will be so. The one who had offered the dying thief “Paradise” would enter it himself as the living Lord. The one who called out “behold” to provide a home for his mother, would now go home himself, to his true home, with God. The one who had felt forsaken by God, would now, like the prodigal son, find the Father’s arms outstretched and hands open wide to welcome him home. The one who cried out, “I thirst” would now reign forever where “they shall hunger and thirst no more.” The one who had said “It is finished” would now enter into the eternal realm that has no end. The one who had opened his hands in love to heal, to feed, to touch, and to receive the nails, would now find other hands, everlasting arms, ready to receive him.

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” A bedtime prayer? Perhaps. We might not know, but we can pray, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” If I should die? Some day, we shall. And then, may we pray with our Lord, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Amen.