

Luke 22:14-23:56
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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Joseph Haydn based his famous musical meditation "The Seven last words of Christ" on a compilation of all the Gospel versions. The original piece was for orchestra only; the words were added in a later version. The actual last words vary in the Gospels:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew & Mark

"It is finished." Gospel of John

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Luke

Haydn ends the piece, as does the writer of the Gospel of Luke "In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum." "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

I think that for me, and perhaps many members of my generation who grew up during the Korean War, the constant threat of nuclear war, and the Vietnam war, the words remembered by Matthew and Mark are the ones we most relate to, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" I was terrified for years, with the regular drills in school of diving under our desks, and I remember looking out my bedroom window every night before going to bed to see if the mushroom cloud was there.

It felt to many of us that God had forsaken us, and when we went to college or to Vietnam during the period many of us explored the idea that "God was dead."

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And yet, let us remember that we have the Gospel of Luke with a different take on Jesus' last words. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." He's calm, knowing that he is returning to his father, his creator. And that knowledge has guided him throughout his life and especially in the last day of it. Jesus will die an ignominious death on the cross and yet he remains in control of his responses. He's the original non-anxious presence. He ends his life and ministry as he began it being tempted in the wilderness, always remaining faithful to God.

Jesus is what he says, and he is what he does, there is an incredible coherence between the two in Jesus. That is our constant challenge as Christians, isn't it, to live out what we believe. It is not easy to live out what we believe, and we always seem to fall short, but it is our constant challenge.

We strive to act in ways Jesus did, to imitate his care for the poor and the outcasts, the widow and orphans. To treat those who are not like us as fellow children of God and equals no matter their status, their race, their culture. We believe we can make a difference by what we do, and rightly so. We are still dealing with incredible poverty in this world, racism and other types of prejudice, including religious prejudice, still abound, we are still working to reduce and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons, (new steps were taken just this week) and we are currently involved in a number of wars. I could go on and on. We are constantly challenged to live out our beliefs. We show who we are by what we do.

But I recently read an essay by the theologian, Stephen Shoemaker, which brings up something else which intrigues me. He reminds us that Judas 'handed Jesus over' to the Hebrew authorities. In Luke's gospel Jesus is not only "handed over" by Judas, he is then handed over by the Hebrew authorities to Pilate, Pilate hands him over to Herod, who then hands him back. Finally Pilate hands him over to the will of the crowd.

The Greek word for passion is pascho, which means ‘to be done to’ which, if you think about it, is the opposite of ‘to do’. Shoemaker reminds us that “God is redeeming the world through both action and passion, because our lives are made up of both what is done to us and what we do.”

“Such was the risk of incarnation itself,” he adds, “God handing Jesus over into our hands, Jesus now vulnerable to all the ways life acts upon us: love, rejection, disease, unforeseeable events, beauty and cruelty.”

It is not only what Jesus does, it is how he handles what is done to him at the end, which is also, I believe, our challenge to imitate. What if our first instinct is not to react in anger to what is done to us, but to react as Jesus did, as a non-anxious presence.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians writes, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Are we people of death?

or

Are we people of the resurrection?

That is the question Holy Week puts to us.

According to the Gospel of Luke Jesus ends his life being crucified on the cross with two prayers to God. We all know them:

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

and

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

What better prayers to live by, and die by, than these? Amen.