

# Meditations on the Seven Last Words of Christ



Photo courtesy of Kristin Hollenbach-Black

by members of the  
Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

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**First Word** Luke 23:33–34

*And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

I once had the privilege of taking part in a retreat with Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor of a Salvadoran army attack on eight or nine hundred campesinos in the village of El Mozote. Rufina's husband, four young children, and every other man, woman and child were brutally murdered, but in the chaos she managed to slip away. Having been thus chosen by God to be witness to the atrocity, Rufina overcame her shock and sorrow in order to give testimony to the U.S. Congress and British Parliament.

We were in awe of her, of her courage and ability to speak out. However, she asked a favor of us that left us speechless. As a devout Christian, Rufina believed that she was required to reach a state of forgiving her enemies—but she could not. Could we help her?

A long uneasy silence ensued. Finally a pastor broke the silence. Forgiveness is a reciprocal act: not only must the injured one forgive, but the perpetrator must accept forgiveness. He added, "The killers of your children have not asked for forgiveness. They have not even confessed to this crime. Thus you *cannot* forgive them; it is not possible."

I don't know whether his words helped her or not. I don't even know if they are true: it may be that there is value *to the injured one* in forgiving, whether it is received or not. Every Lent, when I re-read Jesus' plea from the cross, I am confronted again by the lesson he gave us. Not just to love our enemies but to forgive them. But Jesus says to forgive because "they know not what they do." Did the Salvadoran soldiers not know what they were doing, killing hundreds of poor people who had no political affiliation? Surely their lieutenant knew; he had been trained at the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, GA. Guilt for a monstrous evil is writ all over this event: all knew, and now we know, we whose taxes pay for the School of the Americas, and we are guilty, too.

As always, Jesus' words push us further than we want to go. The words of a former prisoner of the Colombian police are instructive. When Hector Mondragon spoke out for the rights of indigenous Colombians, he was arrested and tortured by a policeman trained in counterterrorism at Ft. Benning. Finally a friend procured his release. That was many years ago, but even today his life is in danger. Mondragon says that he has forgiven his torturer, *but he cannot rest until the School of the Americas is shut down*. There is a moral imperative connected with the act of forgiveness, a price to pay for reconciliation.

Now, every year when I go to Ft. Benning to protest the existence of the SOA, I am protesting the deaths of Rufina's children and the thousands of others throughout Latin America killed by the School's graduates. And I search my heart, wanting not to find hatred of the killers there. Yes, we must forgive; but to do so requires that we also work for justice. After all, what is forgiveness for if not the restoration of right relationships?

***Lord, teach us the mystery of your forgiveness, and let us live as forgiven people.***

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**Second Word**                      *Luke 23:39-43*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be in Paradise with me."*

On January 19<sup>th</sup>, I attended an Interfaith worship service remembering the legacy of peace and justice of Martin Luther King Jr, organized by the Olive Branch Interfaith Peace Partnership and held at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Washington, DC. The historic sanctuary was filled to capacity, with well over one thousand people in attendance to hear what amounted to a "prophetic preach-in" that lasted nearly four hours. There was an interfaith children's choir that rocked the house, and there were Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Unitarians and Christians of all persuasions who shared personal reflections on the meaning of Dr. King's refusal to separate the "triple evils" of poverty, racism, and war.

"Today you will be in Paradise with me."

It seems such a silly thing to say, doesn't it? Pain and suffering and evil abound, even to the point at which Jesus is being put to death on a cross, and still he insists that for those who choose to believe, Paradise awaits.

I heard a little bit of that silliness at All Souls Church that night. It wasn't that folks like Dr. James Forbes, or Dr. Vincent Harding - who were the last two speakers that night - were unaware of the reality that Dr. King's "triple evils" still pervade every aspect of our society and our world more than forty years after he made the speech. It was obvious from their recitation of the challenges that still confront us that they know far better than most of us the ways in which violence and racism and poverty continue to define us as a people, and separate us from God's deepest desire for us. Still, as Christians these men, and countless other faithful folks like them, remain stubbornly, defiantly, committed to the promise Jesus makes - Paradise is possible.

Paradise is possible - even when evil surrounds us, even when we are humbled, together with the criminal hung beside Jesus, by our own culpability and the simple truth that we don't deserve to be a part of God's promise. Paradise is possible even as Jesus himself is being put to death in an act of state-sponsored torture and execution, with the full blessing and encouragement of the religious leaders of the day.

"Today you will be in Paradise with me."

A word of hope, from Jesus himself, even in the darkest hour of the Lenten journey.

*Oh Lord, as we look toward the resurrection from the dark place of the cross,  
give us the strength to humble ourselves with the criminal,  
and the courage to believe in Jesus' promise that the reign of God awaits us.  
Amen.*

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**Third Word**      *John 19:25-27*

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother,  
and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.  
When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her,  
he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."  
Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother."  
And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."*

From the cross Jesus teaches us a truth which Mother Teresa existentially understood. "The problem with the world is that we draw the circle of our family too small."

The nails had been pounded home through his hands and feet; his garments had been divided among the four soldiers who considered them a kind of bonus. Jesus' physical and psychological pain on a scale of 1-10, was a 10. This is when the Lord looks down from his cross and sees his very own mother and what John would have us believe, is his best friend.

In spite of his own agony, Jesus talks about healing *their* pain by enlarging their particular families which would uphold and support one another in their grief over his death. To Mary, his mother, Jesus says, "John is now *your son*; and to John he says, Mary, my mother, is now *your mother*."

It wasn't the only time Jesus had talked about humanity's need to expand its own concept of the family circle. After Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit, his mother Mary and his brothers asked to speak to him. When told of this summons, he asked, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my Mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matthew 12:46-50)

Einstein's mother is supposed to have said, "Everybody's a relative." No, we are not only our brother's or sister's keeper. We are our brother's brother and sister. In Jesus' family, everybody is a relative: He or she is a relative theologically, economically, politically, socially, and if there's still another human wall that needs to be hurdled so that human crosses and human pain no longer disgrace this earth, that too.

Purposefully and intentionally expanding our own particular family circles is God's work; it's the Church's work; expanding our own family is the beating heart of Peacemaking; it's your work and mine. For we are all relatives.

***Now we our vow of faith renew, Stretch wide our sights to global view,  
And claim with Christians far and near A larger family held dear. Amen***

(Wonder of Wonders, Here Revealed. Jane Huber. 4<sup>th</sup> verse)

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***Fourth Word Mark 15: 33–34***

*When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon  
when Jesus cried out with a loud voice,  
“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”  
which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

The words haunt me, and break my heart. Jesus. Forsaken. Like so many children. War-ravaged villages and nations. Those who lie dying alone. Men and women tortured. Where is God when these things happen?

Jesus did not deserve this suffering. For one so loving to die such a death—no, he did not deserve it. But he chose it. Chose to suffer that anguish. He bore the full force of our hatred and fear, confessing in his own body the greatness of our sin. In all times and places Christ is the companion of those who are oppressed. And so he has been crucified many times. The nightmare of inhumanity has not ceased; in fact it is continually renewed.

A man named Eric Fair served by contract as an interrogator for the United States Army. Two years ago his nightmare was published in The Washington Post. These are his words:

“A man with no face stares at me from the corner of a room. He pleads for help, but I'm afraid to move. He begins to cry. It is a pitiful sound, and it sickens me. He screams, but as I awaken, I realize the screams are mine. . . .

Though the man . . . has no face, I know who he is. I assisted in his interrogation at a detention facility in Fallujah. . . . The lead interrogator . . . had given me specific instructions: I was to deprive the detainee of sleep during my 12-hour shift by opening his cell every hour, forcing him to stand in a corner and stripping him of his clothes.

Three years later the tables have turned. It is rare that I sleep through the night without a visit from this man. His memory harasses me as I once harassed him.”

We long to escape, to pass through the horror of crucifixion to the joy of resurrection. But before we can identify with the One who was crucified, we must identify with those who crucified him. We must remember that it was at our hand that he suffered when we open ourselves to the painful, haunting mystery of Jesus's anguish: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The words ring in my ears. They convict me of my guilt. I cannot wash my hands of the blood that continues to be shed in my name, the bodies and souls that continue to be brutalized for the sake of freedom, progress, expediency. Cruelty and despair cast an unholy shadow over us, like the eery midday darkness that fell over the land as Jesus hung on the cross. Christ is crucified again and again, and it is fitting that we should listen with horror to the sound of his suffering. For this is the one who says, “Truly, I tell you, just as you do to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do it to me.”

*Lord, Jesus, you gave your life for us.  
You suffered and died that we might be made whole.*

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***Fifth Word John 19:28***

*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said, "I am thirsty."*

I can never hear these words from the cross without recalling another time and place where thousands thirsted in their dying agony. The story was indelibly printed in my heart on a pilgrimage I made to Nagasaki on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Atomic Bomb.

As a child, two of the horrors of World War Two were seared into my consciousness and became lifelong passions for justice and peace – the holocaust of the Nazi death camps and the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I had gone to the store on the morning of August 6, 1945, to pick up the newspaper for our family. I had no idea what the words "ATOM BOMB" meant, but I raced home because I had never seen such a huge headline. In subsequent years I read everything I could find about Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the summer of 1970, a new book on "Nagasaki, the Forgotten Bomb" inspired me to go there for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last nuclear bomb ever used against people in war. On the remote island of Kyushu where Nagasaki is located, I met only six other westerners attending the observances, one American, one German, and several Greeks. A newspaper photographer befriended me and became my translator.

The Urakami River ran through the residential neighborhood over which the bomb exploded on August 9<sup>th</sup>. As in Hiroshima on August 6<sup>th</sup>, everyone still living after the enormous blast, the blinding light, the searing heat, and the mushroom cloud that rained radioactive ash – everyone who could still move headed for the rivers. School children later made drawings of their memories, picturing people going toward the river, saying "to the river, to the river". For the many who lay suffering and unable to walk, dying from the radiation sickness, there was one loving act to relieve their agony, to bring some comfort – giving a drink of water.

I visited the Peace Park near Ground Zero the day before the Anniversary and saw its lovely flowers, its massive modern Buddha-like statue reaching up and out as though calling heaven and earth to witness, and its simple large circular fountain. Fountains with running water are a common sight at shrines and temples in Japan, usually with long-handled dippers that visitors use to drink or refresh themselves.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary fell on a Sunday. At the early morning Memorial Mass at the rebuilt Urakami Church and the City Observance in the Peace Park, there were two themes. The first was prayer to remember the dead, all who died and were still dying from the atomic sickness and its ongoing effects. The second prayer was for peace, that there would never again be such a weapon used against people.

The action in the Peace Park that afternoon centered around the fountain, where people lined up in a long queue to perform a sacred act. My photographer friend told me about the rectangular stone block set low at one side of the circular fountain. The words engraved on

it invited all to kneel down, fill a dipper and gently splash the cool water against the stone as a symbolic act of giving a drink to those who suffered and thirsted and died.

In later years I got to kneel and pray at the Peace Park in Hiroshima, as I have also knelt to pray in Gethsemane and other sacred places in the Holy Land, and at former concentration camps and bombed-out cathedrals in Europe. But no act ever meant as much to me as waiting my turn that day, kneeling down and taking a dipper of water to splash against the stone. It was a personal commitment to work for the abolition of war, to seek alternatives to war, and to act with others to keep nuclear weapons from ever being used again.

"I thirst", said Jesus in his last dying moments on the cross.

Whenever we give a cup of water to those who are thirsty, we are responding to Jesus' plea. Whenever we work to end personal executions and the mass execution of war, we are giving a drink to Jesus.

*Jesus, give us ears to hear the voices of those who thirst,  
and hearts to serve you by helping them. Amen.*

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***Sixth Word John 19:29***  
*A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine  
on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.  
When Jesus had received the wine, he said,  
"It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

Slow death by torture, including vinegar.

It is not yet Lent as I write. It is January 12, the day after the 7th anniversary of the arrival of the first detainees at the U.S. Army base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Yesterday I went to a service of worship held to mark that anniversary. The interfaith service included the testimony of a man picked up while involved in a nonviolent demonstration in his native Cameroon, imprisoned and tortured there, then deported, only to arrive at JFK Airport in New York without papers and find himself detained in a prison right there in the airport .

He could speak no English at all and was unable to understand questions or instructions. The prison had no windows. Other inmates had been there for very long periods. He was held many months with no idea what was to become of him. Eventually released, he is today under treatment at the Bellevue Hospital Center for Victims of Torture.

That man's life has been of as little value to the governments of Cameroon and the United States as Jesus' was to the Roman Empire. We Christians worship a man of no value. In the eyes of Rome and the Sanhedrin, not to mention the professional atheists we have with us today -- let's call this aggregate "the world" -- he's finished.

And not only them. You can call yourself a believer and still lift vinegar to Jesus' lips. It's a simple thing. Justify the torture of a human being in the name of safety, security, public order. Or practice torture yourself as a public servant when told to do so. Never mind that Jesus was on the receiving end of it. Never mind that he still is, because what we do to the least of persons we do to him. Don't think too consistently about that. He's finished.

Cross your heart and swear by the Resurrection. Sing loudly on Easter. Curse the infidels. Pass the vinegar. He's finished. Isn't he?

It was over and done. Wasn't it?

Said so himself. Didn't he?

Why are we talking about this? Isn't it over?

The thought often comes to me: if violence and torture could win, Jesus Christ would be dead today.

Hamlet said: "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

The trouble is, Jesus died a fertile death. New life keeps coming out of it. And in a curious way the same is true of those who are tortured today in Cameroon or Guantanamo or wherever. Their pain haunts us, disturbs our sleep, bedevils our imaginations. The problem is the link between our unpractical belief -- the kind we give lip service to -- and these unspeakable crimes.

If only it were finished.

*God of all life, we believe. Help Thou our unbelief. Amen.*

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**Seventh Word**    *Luke 23:46*  
*Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,*  
*"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."*  
*Having said this, he breathed his last.*

God is Dead! My first reaction as Jesus breathed his last breath shocks me. The Messiah gave his last breath to do God's will. And God's will was to redeem the World, *once and for all*. God so loved the world...that God gave God's only son...so that we might have life and have it abundantly!

Put in this context, Jesus' final words from the cross are clearly marching orders for those who will follow God's desire for humankind. "Into your hands I commend my spirit, O Lord." It is no longer me, me, me...but Your will be done...*on earth as it is in heaven*. It is now our task to redeem the times. In Jesus, God gave us the ultimate clarion call to be God's people...for the life of the world!

For Peaceseekers this is the ultimate challenge in our time. We are challenged to "be all that we can be," as we witness to God's love for the world...all the world...all the people...all the creation...ALL!

So in this final lenten reflection it is time to reflect on our individual responsibility to this radical action of God in Jesus. This final act of dying. God died! So that we could live! Our lives require of us a faithfulness that others tend to call many different things...radical...reactionary...crazy...frivolous...even stupid. Yes, it is important for us to reflect on what the Lord requires of us.

I guess that brings us to the test. What does the Lord require of you? Put it on your bumper sticker...Make it the slogan over your door as you walk out of the house...Wear it on the bracelet where your WWJD was a few years ago. What does the Lord require of you? *To do justice...to love mercy...and to walk humbly with your Lord!*

*Let us pray...*

*God, give us the patience to hear your voice in our time. As we seek to do your will, help us to witness your desire for a world that reflects your love, your mercy, your justice and your humility. Give us your wisdom as we walk in your light. Amen.*

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