

Text: Matthew 27.38-43  
St Stephen's

March 28, 2010  
Sat/Sun

## Seven Words Spoken to Jesus on the Cross

Just that fast the shouts of praise turned to cries of condemnation. Just that fast friends turned to foes. Just that fast Sunday turned to Friday. Welcome to 'The Week that changed the world'. We call it 'Holy Week'.

We look ahead to the events of Friday this morning, to the suffering and death of Jesus. You know of **7 words spoken by Jesus** from the cross during those hours (this year again we will preach through all 7 of those words on Good Friday). Did you know that there were also **7 words spoken to Jesus** while he hung on the cross? 7 groups of people came by and had something to say. I want to look at them this morning... At the end of each word I will ask your **silent prayers** for a special group of people. I will conclude each moment of silent prayer with...

"Lord, in your mercy..."

Please respond with...

"Hear our prayer"

### I. **The Passers-By** Matthew 27.39-40

The 1<sup>st</sup> group we see are called by Matthew "***Those who passed by...***" They weren't there for the duration. They were hurried people on their way to keep important appointments. These were busy people with a full day in front of them; they had people to see and places to go. But they wanted to **take a peek** that afternoon. People love to 'take a peek'. So they "passed by".

They probably hadn't given it all that much thought, with their busy lives, but they were **sure of this**: a Roman cross was **a curse**. So they shook their heads, they threw up some insults... "*Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!*" And they moved on. They were **too busy**. Some people **never remain long enough or near enough** to the cross to catch sight of **a curse being lifted**. They passed by.

**You know people like this**, so rushed, so stressed, so distracted with what in the end matters little... that they pass by what matters most. Pray that they would pause and draw near to the cross of Jesus.

**Let us pray....** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer.'*

## **II. The Religious Leaders** Matthew 27.41-43

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> group is **the religious leaders**, the chief pastors and bishops and seminary profs... They joined right in and **taunted** Jesus with 3 titles...

**"Savior"**

"Save yourself!"

**"King of Israel"**

"Issue a command!"

**"Son of God"**

"Call your Father!"

Of the many forms of authority and leadership given to people, the responsibility to lead for God is perhaps the heaviest to bear. The **temptation** to mistake your voice for his, your wisdom for his, your plans for his... is always at hand.

**Pray for your clergy**, that as Paul said it, it would not be *'ourselves that we proclaim, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Christ's sake...'*

**Let us pray...** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer.'*

## **III. The Soldiers** Luke 23.36-38

Our 3<sup>rd</sup> group is a cluster of proud, **hardened** Roman soldiers. They **despised** these Jews and their feeble, strange religion. Their execution of Jesus that day was a blunt statement: "Roman nails are stronger than Jewish Gods!" They toasted him with sour wine.

Roman legions put to death 1000's of people for the glory of their empire. They mocked anyone who would stand in their way: "If you are a King, do something about this!" **Their motto** was, "We came, we saw, we conquered". **His motto** was "I came, I served, I gave my life". Their empire long ago turned to dust. His Kingdom has outlasted not just Rome but will outlast the world itself.

**Pray for our soldiers and our safety forces.** You know many of them. Pray that those who bear the sword in their hands would bear the Lord in their hearts!

**Let us pray...** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer.'*

#### **IV. The Hostile Criminal** Luke 23.39

Our 4<sup>th</sup> speaker is **a criminal** who charged through life leaving a path of destruction behind him. He doesn't seem to care much. **His heart** is marked by anger and hatred and bitterness, it's small and hard – and almost dead. **His great regret** is that he got caught. He insults and curses everyone around him. Finally, he directs his venom at Jesus.

*"Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* "Loser!" He curses God and sinks.

**I ask your prayers for people caught in anger and bitterness and unforgiveness. You know people like this:** few prisons are so dark and so deadly. And mercy is so near...

**Let us pray...** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer'*

#### **V. The Repentant Criminal** Luke 23.40-43

Jesus was crucified **between two thieves**. The **physician** was among the sick. He had come to seek and save the lost.

Our 5<sup>th</sup> speaker is **the second criminal**. The first criminal looked at his life and blamed the world. The second criminal looked at his life and feared what he had become.

We don't know how he was convinced of Jesus' **innocence**. Perhaps he had heard the stories about **Jesus' ministry**. Or perhaps it was **Jesus' prayer**: "Father, forgive them...". Or perhaps it was the **sacred blood** flowing... He prayed, maybe his very first prayer: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom..."*

With nothing to lose, he risked everything. He saw the door opening and he left.

This was the only spoken word to receive an **answer...** *"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

There was only one deathbed conversion in the NT... **There is only one...** that we might not presume and delay until tomorrow what is possible today. **But there is one...** that we might know that while this life lasts, it is **not yet too late.**

**Pray for those nearing the end of their lives,** and who yet have a clear moment to turn and look for God's rich mercy, only a prayer away.

**Let us pray...** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer'*

## **VI. The Believers in Elijah** Mark 15.33-36

It is a brutal scene, at the end of the three hour ordeal. Jesus cries out and some mistake it for a call to Elijah. I call this 6<sup>th</sup> group the '**believers in Elijah**'. One of them ran to get him a sponge with sour wine. And then they mocked. **Religious tradition** and a **little kindness** and a **lot of cynicism.** Strange bedfellows; ever see that?

These were the kind of **people who wanted...** a **Christ without the cross, religion** without repentance, soft truths with sweet words that would have, in the end, no power to save.

In Elijah's day, their fathers ran the prophet out of town. In their own day, they stood by the cross and mocked. Do you know people like this in our own day?

**Pray for the religious people of our churches,** who too often combine religious tradition and a little kindness and a lot of cynicism...

**Let us pray...** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer'*

## **VII. The Centurion** Mark 15.37-39

The 7<sup>th</sup> voice was that of the **Roman Centurion**. He was the Captain of 100 men, and he presided over this day. A hardened veteran, a soldier's soldier, he had seen it all. Until he saw this.

Perhaps the **long career** of military campaigns and brutal enforcement of Roman rule was **wearing thin**.

Perhaps it was something he had seen of this **Jewish people** and their faith in this one **God**... Maybe it was getting through!

Probably it was **Jesus** himself... he must have heard about Jesus - the stories of miracles, the words he had said, the incidents with other soldiers, the whisper that he was a King, the way common people loved him – and the way the leaders hated him... He had a long afternoon to think about all this.

And he wouldn't have missed **the way he died**... willingly, no resistance, no bitterness or rage, no screams or curses, but praying for his enemies while they taunted him... words of paradise to a repentant thief...

Be it this or more, it all began to work on his heart that long afternoon as **the blood** of the one they had called "Savior" **flowed**. **A thought began to grow** in him. As the hours wore on it grew louder. Could it be? Might it be? By the end of that day the thought had grown firm, doubt gave way to faith, and he dared to speak it out...

*"Surely this man was the Son of God!"*

The executioner had become a believer!

**Pray for the seekers, and you know lots of them.** Maybe you are one yourself, looking for more in life, looking for the mercy and life you have secretly pursued your whole life...

**Let us pray...** Lord, in your mercy.... *'Hear our prayer'*

**Did you notice what happens at the cross?** As people draw near the cross, something strange takes place: secret thoughts are revealed, hidden motives are uncovered.

The cross has a **revealing power**. It **exposes** everything. As one theologian said, **"The cross says what a thing really is."** When you learn to **look at life alongside the cross**, everything is seen for what it really is. Intimate thoughts, private motives, true intentions, core values – no matter how hidden to others, no matter how hidden to ourselves – come to the surface. The cross uncovers everything and reveals everything, and sets them **next to God's own heart**, now also open for all to see. **God reveals in order to heal. That happens at the cross.**

Nobody liked the cross. To many it is irrefutable proof of weakness or insanity or impotence or godlessness. Five of these witnesses taunted Jesus to **come down** and prove his claims to be a King, a savior, the son of God.

His disciples would have agreed. They were to a man aghast at his acquiescence to this brutal death. "This is a bit much" we whisper. "The problem is not that bad" we say!

But this king **did not come down** from his throne. As the blood of the Lamb began to flow, a broken Jewish criminal and a proud Roman centurion found forgiveness and paradise through faith in the dying Jesus. And so have millions of people like us who in the hard places of life have reached to Jesus and the power of his death to find a new life, a new mercy, and a new hope.

Don't be a passer-by or a cynic, but draw near to the cross of Jesus and look.... think.... believe... and live! **Welcome to the week that changed the world!**