

The Seven Last Words

The Third Word

“Woman, behold, your son!”

²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!”
And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.
(John 19:26–27)

St. Bernard’s: March 21st 2017
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As we come to the Third Word from the Cross we are aware of a progression in Jesus’ prayer. His first word had been directed towards his enemies, those who colluded to bring about his Crucifixion and those who mockingly derided him as they looked on at his crucifixion.

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

Among those enemies were the two being crucified on either side of him. St Mark alone is the Gospel writer who has this revealing verse:

Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

Did you get that? At the 9 am hour, those who flanked Jesus were both disdainful and insulting, like the others gathered around the Cross. But with the one, something happens. Was it this prayer for His enemies that brought the one criminal to the place where he now addresses the Lord in the most personal way?

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Do you see what has happened? He has moved from enemy, to convert. But conversion to Jesus then leads naturally to hearing the third word from the Cross:

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

Here is what we see with these opening three words. A progression from a prayer for enemies, a word of promise spoken to a convert:

Truly you will be with me today in paradise

To a word where Jesus addresses his family.

Woman, here is your son. Son here is your mother.

From foe, to friend, to family. This is the progression we see with the first Three Words. With the Second Word, this thief has entered into a most personal relationship with Jesus. He is the only person in the Gospels who directly addresses Jesus by his name, without the title Lord.

“Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom”.

Many people think that all I need is a personal relationship with Jesus, but I do not need the Church. Or if I do need the Church, it is not the Church where Mary has a central role to play. However, if we pay

attention to the progression of these words, a personal relationship with Jesus, as the Second Word so beautifully expresses, lead naturally to become members of Jesus' new family, the Church. And it is not just any Church, but the Roman Catholic Church.

I know first-hand of what I am speaking, having spent the first fifty one years of my life as an Anglican. A personal relationship with Jesus had been important to me from the time I was in my early twenties. But I did not begin to understand the significance of this third word until five years ago. Indeed it was five years ago this month, that I knew, I had to become a Roman Catholic. So it is particularly meaningful for me to speak on this word. For with the third word, we are told that after Jesus address His Mother and John,

that from that day John took Mary into his home.

There can be no Church that is not closely connected to Mary. From the Cross we are told that from Jesus' side poured forth water and blood. Just as from the side of Adam, who during his deep sleep, was born his bride Eve; so too when Jesus slept the sleep of death, from his side was born his Bride, the Church, represented by the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist.

With the third word from the Cross we hear Jesus' last word directed towards those around the Cross. Having prayed for his foes, he welcomed a friend and now he addresses his family. The fourth word will be Jesus praying of Psalm 22. His fifth, sixth and seventh words will all be addressed to the Father as he breathes his last.

It is therefore significant that Jesus' last words spoken to humans before his death are words by which he establishes the Church and states the central place Mary is to have in the family.

Jesus is always desiring that those who are his enemies have their hearts converted towards him. Such a conversion is not only towards Jesus but also a conversion towards his mother and the family that is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

So let us enter into a meditative attitude as we ponder this Third Word from the Cross. For this next section I am going to read a beautiful meditation by Venerable Fulton Sheen on the Third Word.

As we begin I invite you to leave the Cross and go to Nazareth, and ponder awhile the Solemnity of the Annunciation, a day we will mark next Saturday, March 25th. I would invite you to close your eyes and allow this stirring prose touch your soul and mind.

Venerable Fulton Sheen writes:

An angel of light went out from the great white Throne of Light and descended over the plains of Esdraelon, past the daughters of the great kingdoms and empires, and came to where a humble virgin of Nazareth knelt in prayer, and said, "Hail, full of grace!" These were not words; they were the Word. "And the Word became flesh." This was the first Annunciation. Nine months passed and once more an angel from that great white Throne of Light came down to shepherds on Judean hills, teaching them the joy of a "Gloria in excelsis," and bidding them worship Him Whom the world could not contain, a "Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Eternity became time, Divinity incarnate, God a man; Omnipotence was discovered in bonds. In the language of Saint Luke, Mary "brought forth her firstborn Son... and laid Him in a manger." This was the first Nativity.

Then came Nazareth and the carpenter shop where one can imagine the Divine Boy, straitened until baptized with a baptism of blood, fashioning a little cross in anticipation of a great Cross that would one day be His on Calvary. One can also imagine Him in the evening of a day of labor at the bench, stretching out His arms in exhausted relaxation, while the setting sun traced on the opposite wall the shadow of a man on a cross. One can, too, imagine His Mother seeing in each nail the prophecy and the telltale of a day when men would carpenter to a Cross the One who carpentered the universe.

Nazareth passed into Calvary, and the nails of the shop into the nails of human malignity. From the Cross He completed His last will and testament. He had already committed His blood to the Church, His garments to His enemies, a thief to Paradise, and would soon commend His body to the grave and His soul to His Heavenly Father.

To whom, then, could He give the two treasures which He loved above all others, Mary and John? He would bequeath them to one another, giving at once a son to His Mother and a Mother to His friend. "Woman!" It was the second Annunciation! The midnight hour, the silent room, the ecstatic prayer had given way to the mount of Calvary, the darkened sky, and a Son hanging on a Cross. Yet, what consolation! It was only an angel who made the first Annunciation, but it is God's own sweet voice which makes the second. "Behold your son!" It was the second Nativity! Mary had brought forth her First-born without labour. (Aside: We know from Genesis that the pains of child birth was a consequence of the Sin of Adam and Eve. A Sin from which Mary was Immaculate). Such a birth happened in the cave of Bethlehem; she now brings forth her second-born, John, in the labours of the Cross. At this moment Mary is undergoing the pains of childbirth, not only for her second-born, who is John, but also for the millions who will be born to her in Christian ages as "Children of Mary." Now we can understand why Christ was called "her First-born." It was not because she was to have other children by the blood of flesh, but because she was to have other children by the blood of her heart. Truly, indeed, the Divine condemnation against Eve (that is the pain accompanying child birth) is now renewed against the new Eve, Mary, for she is bringing forth her children in sorrow. Mary, then, is not only the Mother of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, but she is also our Mother, and this not by a title of courtesy, not by legal fiction, not by a mere figure of speech, but by the right of bringing us forth in sorrow at the foot of the Cross. It was by weakness and disobedience at the foot of the tree of Good and Evil that Eve lost the title, Mother of the Living; it is at the foot of the tree of the Cross that Mary, by sacrifice and obedience, regained for us the title, Mother of the Living. What a destiny to have the Mother of God as my Mother and Jesus as my Brother!¹

PAUSE

I find this language beautiful and arresting, particularly what Venerable Sheen says at the end:

It was by weakness and disobedience at the foot of the tree of Good and Evil that Eve lost the title, Mother of the Living; it is at the foot of the tree of the Cross that Mary, by sacrifice and obedience, regained for us the title, Mother of the Living.

There is no Christianity without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, as the Second Word teaches us. Similarly there is no full Christianity without the one Jesus addresses as the Second Eve, this Woman whose millions of children, include you and me. Like John, we are to take Mary home with us.

¹ Sheen, Fulton J.. The Seven Last Words (Kindle Location 197). ST PAULS. Kindle Edition.

Let us think more fully about this part of the word, that John took Mary to his own home.

This is what it says in the English translation; but the Greek text is far deeper, far richer. We could translate it: he took Mary into his inner life, his inner being, into the depths of his being. To take Mary with one means to introduce her into the dynamism of one's own entire existence it is not something external, but something internal.

This Third Word helps us to discover that to take Mary home with us, into our inner life, is expressed so powerfully whenever we say the Hail Mary.

“Pray for us, pray for me now, and at the hour of our, my death”.

These are the only two moments that really matter; the present moment and our final moment. In asking for our Mother's intercession we are saying to her, please Mary enter into the inner depths of my being and share with me deep within my soul a place of prominence.

There is a special way this relationship we are to have with Mary is expressed in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John. John shows us in a beautiful way how we are to bring Mary home with us.

Remember the John who wrote the Revelation is the John at the foot of the Cross, whom Jesus entrusted to Mary.

In the opening Chapter of the Revelation St. John addresses those to whom he is writing in this most familial like way:

I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Now this is informative. In his letters St. John refers to the recipients of his letters as beloved Children. Here at the beginning of Revelation he identifies with them as “your brother”. He says that he shares with his brothers and sisters in three things:

First of all the tribulation.

What does this word mean? Originally, it meant simply pressure and could, for instance, describe the pressure of a great stone on someone's body. At first it was used quite literally, but in the New Testament it has come to describe the pressure of events which constitutes persecution.

Secondly, he shares in the Kingdom:

That is John knew that even now, in the present, where the tribulation experienced because of a world in opposition to Jesus and his Church, this could not diminish his experience of the Kingdom. The Kingdom Jesus ushered in and is now extending through the Church.

Thirdly, he refers to the Patient Endurance.

Patience Endurance is not the patience which simply passively submits to the tide of events; it describes the spirit of courage and conquest which leads to gallantry and transforms even suffering into glory.

The situation of the Christians was and is this. They were in tribulation and were looking towards the kingdom, into which they entered through the Church and which one day they would fully experience in Heaven. There was only one way from tribulation to kingdom, from affliction to glory, and that was through conquering endurance.

Now the reason why he is on Patmos where they tribulation, kingdom and patience endurance converge is on account of:

“the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus”.

Now keep this in mind as we head over to chapters 11 and 12. Right at the end of chapter 11 St. John writes:

Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple

The Ark of the Covenant had been last seen by Jews at the time of the Babylonian Captivity some six hundred years earlier. What did the Ark contain? We know from Hebrews 9:4 it contained three things:

wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant;

The Manna

The Staff of Aaron the High Priest.

The Ten Commandments

With this in mind listen to what St. John writes at the beginning of chapter 12:

And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;

So now the ark is no longer an object but a person, a woman clothed with the sun. This is Mary who is not only the New Eve but the true Ark of the Covenant. For just as the Ark contained Manna, Mary’s womb contained the “Bread of Life”. Just as the Ark contained the staff of Aaron, the High Priest, Mary’s womb was home to Jesus the Great High Priest. Just as the Ark contained the Ten Commandments, Mary gave birth to the Word.

This Woman, is the Woman Jesus addressed at the Cross and the Woman he addressed at the Wedding at Cana in Galilee.

Keep all of this in mind as we turn to a verse later in Revelation Chapter 12 after the war between Michael the Archangel and the devil. We are told that the Devil lost:

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

So angry is he that St John tells us:

Then the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus

Do you catch that? The dragon is angry with this woman and goes to make war on the rest of her offspring. And who are they? The ones who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.

Do you remember what John said in chapter as to why he was on Patmos?

was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Here is the point I want to make that is at the heart of this evening's talk. We are brother and sisters together because the New Testament makes it explicitly clear we are children of Mary. St John is so clear on this point that he makes the connection between his suffering because of the Word of God and testimony to Jesus with that of the suffering of those who are Mary's offspring.

From the Cross Jesus founded the Church to be structured so that we would take Mary into our homes and into our hearts. As we continue to live in the world we will know the tribulation, the Kingdom and the need for patient endurance.

Such a Trinity of experiences cannot be lived out solely through a personal relationship with Jesus. We need the Church where Mary is celebrated as Mother and we are together her children and brothers and sisters.

Such a community is one that has for 2000 years followed the example of Jesus where in praying for foes, they have become his friends and the members of his family.

Let us Pray:

O Mary! As Jesus was born of you in the flesh at your first Nativity, so we have been born of you in the spirit at your second Nativity. Thus you gave birth to us and brought us into a new world of spiritual relationship with God as our Father, Jesus as our Brother, and you as our very own Mother! If a mother can never forget the child of her womb, then, Mary, you shall never forget us who are your own. As you were Co-Redemptrix in the acquisition of the graces of eternal life, be also our Co-Mediatrix in their dispensation. Nothing is impossible for you, because you are the Mother of Him who can do all things. If your Son did not refuse your request at the banquet of Cana, He will not refuse it at the celestial banquet where you are crowned as Queen of the Angels and Saints. Intercede therefore to your Divine Son, that He may change the waters of my weakness into the wine of your strength. Mary, you are the Refuge of Sinners! Pray for us, now prostrate at the foot of the Cross. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.²

² Sheen, Fulton J.. The Seven Last Words (Kindle Locations 203-205). ST PAULS. Kindle Edition.