

The Last Words of Christ – Life Words for the Church

#3 – “Your mother, your son”

John 19: 25 – 27

Doubtless the scene had occurred many times before, even as it has been repeated countless times since. Family and friends were gathered, waiting for a death that would rob them of someone precious. Yet, in the waiting, they found themselves drawn closely together, their lives becoming far more entwined and strengthened at that place of grieving than they would ever have thought possible. Yet the greatest grace came not from one another, but from the one who was dying.

Few of us there are, I expect, who have not experienced the pain of watching someone die. We want to do something, anything, to relieve their suffering, and are usually helpless to do other than be near. Gladly would we have traded places, especially if the dying one happens to be our child or is someone much younger than us with so much left to do in life. In those moments, we may even feel ashamed that in comparison to the brevity of their portion, our length of days stands in judgment that we have not lived and loved as beautifully or bravely as we might have. How often midst those terrible hours of waiting, praying, grieving, how often in those moments have we found ourselves receiving from them encouragement and inspiration and hope?

The scene where love's final gifting was so amazingly displayed, was of course, Golgotha, the impending death that of Jesus of Nazareth, by crucifixion. The family included Mary, the mother of Jesus, and while it is not clear, it seems that likely Mary's sister was there, along with the wife of Clopas and also Mary Magdalene. Present also was John, the beloved disciple.

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They had gathered at Calvary despite the danger. By being there, they could well be labelled as friends, sympathizers or collaborators of this man condemned by Jewish religion and Roman law alike as a blasphemer, insurrectionist and troublemaker. Still, love demanded they show unfaltering care for a son, teacher and friend. While the other disciples had deserted Jesus, either betraying or denying him, this small band persevered, the family whose love would never end.

But if their love for Jesus drew them close, his powerful love ended up ministering to them when they would least have expected it. John's gospel says that when Jesus saw his mother and John standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" and to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." From that moment, scripture says, the disciple took Mary to his own home.

This passage has much to tell us of Jesus and of our calling. In the agony of the cross when the salvation of the world hung in the balance, Jesus could still take note of the pain his mother would face. Even in the moment of his cosmic battle, Jesus still thought more of the sorrows of others than of his own.

God cares for us, we at times say all too glibly; while we may proclaim the words, the image in mind may well be of a sort of generic sympathy for the human race that is removed or distanced from our particular tragedies, worry or grief. Perhaps we project onto God our own comparative indifferences to people in sorrow. We may feel sadness for the victims of earthquakes in Haiti or Chile, but likely have no deep, personal connectedness to the tragedy. If family or friends were affected by such calamity, however, far more immediate and urgent would be the outpouring of our worry, concern and love.

The concern shown by Jesus in providing for his mother declares that our Saviour's compassion is always immediate, particular, and personal. Do you remember the old Sunday School hymn:

God sees the little sparrow fall, it meets his tender view;

if God so loves the little birds, I know he loves me too.

Thus does God love us, each one – not from a distanced indifference but with passionate, heaven-rending care as only can the heavenly Father who called us into being. Thus does Christ know us, and our needs, fears and longing; and thus does the Lord seek to care for us, even as he died for us each one, as if for us alone he endured the cross. No greater disservice do we give the story of our Lord's sacrifice than ignoring the compassion Jesus extends to us in our brokenness and grief, our confusion or need, in the solitary aloneness of our soul or in the future-fearing journey of our lives.

This last command and blessing of Jesus to his mother and beloved follower were a call to adopt one another, to care for one another, to depend upon one another and support one another, not merely as mother and son, but as a new community and identity formed through his love. As suggested throughout this series, Jesus' words are a charge and benediction to his church, to all who would believe in and yield their lives to him.

The Christian journey was never meant to be an exercise in isolation and independence. Our faith journey is meant to be a shared experience, in which the embrace of community is foundational to our spiritual growth, wholeness and maturity. To belong to Jesus is to belong to one another. A mentality that espouses a "just you and me, Jesus" theology is in fundamental conflict with the command of Jesus to love him by loving one another. To work out our discipleship in fear and trembling, as Paul puts it, can only occur in the crucible of community. Out of a shared love for Jesus, regardless of how unrelated we might be to one another in human terms or different from one another we may be, become we indeed one Body, one community. Jesus' words of mercy to Mary and John are affirmation of that essential community we need find in him through which he would reclaim and join together all the loners and all the lonely,

all the orphans and all the prodigals, all the forgotten and all the forsaken into one family of faith, one people of God.

Sadly we have too often forgotten the Lord's fundamental command to love one another; too often have we ignored that Jesus called us into relationship with one another, into mutual respect and mutual care. And sadly, all too often within congregational families, there is no family togetherness to be found, no depth of mutual concern and support and sensitivity and love. True Christian community is not about mere acquaintance, about superficial handshakes or pretended friendships. Christian counsellor and writer Larry Crabb has argued in his book of the same name that the church should be the safest place on earth, the place where we find ourselves tangibly embraced by God through the open, vulnerable, soul-transparent and loving arms of our sisters and brothers. Yet sadly, how often has our experience been other, so that we would call the church the loneliest place on earth, and the place where instead of tender fellowship in which we knew ourselves to be delighted in and supported, we found neglect and indifference; instead of finding a nurturing welcome and faith-enhancing intimacy of spiritual friendship, we experienced aloofness, judgment, disregard?

Pray God that none should have that experience here in St. Andrew's, and should that have ever been the case, in Christ's name, I repent for us all and bid all of us repent before our Lord that we have failed to hear and respond to his call to be sons and mothers, daughters and fathers, brothers and sisters to one another in faith. Pray God we may never be satisfied with being merely a gathering of strangers for an hour on Sabbath, but that we will strive to create together the community Christ intends for us, in which no one will ever feel orphaned and unwanted, abandoned or disregarded. Especially may that be true as we gather at the table of our Saviour to receive his life and grace so that we may become the means by which his love

and power touch, heal, sustain, encourage, comfort, strengthen and bless each other.

Groucho Marx once remarked that he would never belong to any organization that would sink so low as to have him as a member. Let me tell you, the church will always be a very imperfect fellowship because, surprise, it is filled with imperfect people. Any notion that life together will be fail-safe is unreasonable. We are frail, flawed people who make mistakes and who will inevitably cause hurt to one another off times by accident though occasionally out of our own deep brokenness and sin. Most of all, as one writer said, there will be all the ups and downs that come with connecting with sinful men and women who are struggling to become fully free in Christ.

What matters is that in our imperfections, in our shared dependency on the mercy and grace of Jesus and in our learning how to extend to and receive from one another the reflected mercy and grace of Jesus, we are working to grow beyond what we have been to become what Christ would have us live. Potential, not perfection, is the bottom line. The issue is not whether we have lived up to the standard of perfection for Christian community – we will never achieve that this side of heaven, and it is folly to think we can. The question is whether we are actively working to grow towards our becoming, in and through Christ, the people, the family, the Body and the blessing to each other that he desires us to be.

Are we together daring to let Jesus call us out of our comfortable prisons of familiar fear and lonely despair and draw us into the risky and wonderful business of letting his Spirit save us, open us, challenge and transform us into people who more and more look like and love like him? Are we prepared to become a called-out community adventuring in his grace?

Are we together willing to be moulded and shaped by his grace working through the emery stones that are our sisters and brothers? Are we willing to discover the freedom of Christ in the

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work of becoming honest, vulnerable, compassionate and sacrificial with, towards and for the sake of one another? Are we prepared to become a called-together community learning to love in his power?

Are we prepared to name our own individual quiriness and weirdness with humility, and learn tender patience with the failings and strivings of our quirky, weird and wonderful fellow believers, celebrating our differences with joy and confessing our brokenness and need with hope? Are we prepared to be a community of safe people where we can admit our sin, failures, fear, wounds, and know that through the compassion of one another, we will receive the healing forgiveness of Jesus? Are we prepared to become a confessing community where we let our weaknesses shared with one another become the place wherein Christ's strength reveals itself most beautifully?

Jesus called John and Mary to become, as it were, a new family, even as he calls us to become, together, a new creation in this tired old world. He call us to be this community where his presence and life becomes more and more perfectly expressed and made tangibly real through our "one another-ing", through how we love one another, forgive one another, encourage one another, correct one another, give preference to one another, build up, accept and serve one another, even as we comfort one another and live in peace with one another. He calls us to be the safest place on earth, the holiest and happiest place on earth, because as one people, we find our safety and salvation, our comfort and our peace from him who suffered, died and lives for us, and never stops ministering to us.

Let us pray:

○ Gracious Saviour, whose love for us is so great, and so near, whose love and peace shall can set us free and be our joy, turn our eyes not only upwards to behold how much you love us, but turn our eyes also to all around us, to see behold

the blessed family into which we have by grace been placed.
Loving you, may we love one another, to the glory of your name.
Amen.