

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
"And With These Words, He Died!"

In Christian churches around the world there is a variety of different Services offered for worship on this day we call "Good Friday." In one church it is called "the Mass of the Pre-Sanctified." In another it is called "Tenebrae." Now I come from up North (y'all couldn't tell...). The church where I grew up offered a worship service called "The Preaching of the Passion," or "The Seven Last Words." You did this Service here at Christ Church last year. But you will not find this Service in the Prayer Book. That is because it was a Service put together and changed by several clergy over the years. The service is based on the idea that if you gathered together the various Gospel books you could come up with a series of seven phrases or "Last Words" spoken by Jesus just before he was crucified. Put them together with the right prayers and some hymns and you have a Service for Good Friday. We are not using that Service this year because we now have a Liturgy for Good Friday right here in the Prayer Book. Also, I did not have the time or energy to write seven meditations!

But in those days, when we were just starting to become "ecumenical", the local preachers would gather together and decide that it was silly to have separate services in each church, especially in small communities where only a few people would show up. So we would choose a big place with a nice organ, and invite everyone to participate in one Service. People who still wanted to follow their own tradition could do that, but we would divide up the words and each preacher would offer a sermon on one of the "Seven Last Words."

The Service, of course, would continue for three hours! I mean really, you can't put seven preachers in one pulpit and expect to be finished in 45 minutes! But it worked fine because if you started at Noon, and with some person directing all the preachers, you would finish at three o'clock, covering the hours that Jesus hung on the cross. Of course there were always "problems", like when a choir or singer from one of the other churches would do an anthem that went on about as long as a sermon! But then those were the days when all businesses closed for three hours on Good Friday, there was no school, and communities were, in general, much more religious.

I always enjoyed these services, because you could come and go as you pleased during the three hours. What that really meant was that you could take a break when one of the preachers got boring, or when the singer was terribly flat! But I remember even as a teenager that there was one sermon I never missed. It was the one based on the words from Luke 23:46, where Jesus says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The words continue with "And with these words, Jesus died."

During almost forty years of ministry, I have heard the last words of many persons. But there is one experience that I can recall best. It was the death of my own father. My father was in a hospital suffering from a third heart attack and this time he was dying. Over him there pumped this awful machine trying to keep him

alive. I looked at him in anguish, squeezed his hand and said, "Dad, can you hear me?" Dad nodded. I said, "Is this enough? Are you ready to go?" Again, Dad nodded. Dad never really said anything out loud because the machines and tubes prevented it, but it was obvious to me that he wanted to cry out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

I squeezed his hand one more time and said, "I love you, Dad!" Then I rushed out of the room to find my mother and a doctor to turn off the machine. We all agreed he was beyond recovery and it was time to let him go. I was too emotionally involved to lead the family in any "last rites", so I called a local priest who was also a friend of mine and he arrived just after the doctor had "pulled the plug." My friend began the prayers with "Father, into your hands we commend this spirit." And so, with those words, Dad died.

I didn't realize how important those words were until later at the funeral when my sister, who had not gone in to see Dad when he was dying, cried out how much she loved him and how sorry she was that she had not told Dad this before he died. She also had not experienced that peaceful commitment of his soul before it left the body. She did not know the words with which Dad had died. But I could comfort her with my belief that our dad had found peace in the very words that Jesus used when he died.

Perhaps you can recall a time when you experienced the words of a dying person? It might have been a friend or a close relative. In any case I would be surprised if your experience was much different than the one I had with my father. In fact, almost all of my "death-bed" experiences have been similar to this. It is almost as if the words of Jesus, taken directly from Psalm 31:5, were written on our hearts, for they come to mind and to speech so often. They are a part of our church and our memories. They are words which many of us use in different ways.

For example:

"Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

In an effort to explain or simplify things, we often teach our children poems and prayers like this one. Then we wonder why, as I did, our daughters and sons ask us, "Daddy, does that mean I'm going to die tonight?" "No, darlin', not tonight, but remember these words just in case." Just in case you need some words before you die.

We worship on Good Friday in many different ways. But perhaps the one we have in common is expressed in these words of Jesus which display a trust, an unconditional, ultimate trust in God at a time when most of us will want to run scared! "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

What other words could better indicate our common hope for a new life, a new resurrection in Christ? What other words could possibly offer more comfort to people like us who remain behind? What other words will more accurately express our belief in a God who cares what happens when we die?

"Father, into your hands we commend our spirits."