June 1958


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THE SIGN OF FINALITY

John 19: 30  Jesus said, It is finished.
Luke 23: 46  Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

Fifteen hundred years ago St. Anselm ascended his pulpit on Good Friday and said, "I do not know if I wish to speak today. Why should I speak when my Savior is silent and dies?" Certainly every preacher has felt much the same way. All he can really ask his people to do is think quietly and personally about the meaning of the Cross now that the great drama draws to its close.

Today, therefore, we wish to consider, in Good Friday humility and silence, two sentences at the very close of the scene on Calvary. They are probably the greatest in all the history of human speech. They cover all of life and the shadow of death. The first is, "It is finished!" By this we can live. The second is, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit." By this we can die. To think about these two sentences is therefore a very good way to spend a part of Good Friday.

Let us look at the setting! It is now about three o'clock in the afternoon, the last few moments in the drama of the Cross. The crowd has become a good deal more quiet. Even mobs become still when death rides. Suddenly the head goes up once more under the crown of thorns, and in a loud voice our Lord and Savior says, "It is finished!" The meaning of this sentence must be perfectly clear to all of us. To the Pharisees standing around the Cross, to the Roman soldiers, if they had eyes to see and ears to hear, these words
must have sounded like the crack of doom. Had they after all lost? They were killing Him, but He seemed to feel that He had won a victory. Yes, if they had eyes to see and ears to hear, they would have seen each thorn in His crown become a shining gem in His diadem of glory. They would have seen the nails forged into the scepter of a king. They would have seen His purple wounds clothe Him with the purple of Empire. He had won a great, final and eternal victory. The world was changed. Until the end of time history would now be divided into before and after. He had won a victory which was decisive for all men. All men would now have to decide on their attitude over against the Cross. There could be no neutrality. From this moment on He would be either a stone of stumbling or the way of life and to life.

If we look more closely at our Lord's dying words, "It is finished," we see that He is not referring to the fact that His agony is now ended, that the malice, the hatred, the pain, the heart broken with sorrow are now done and set aside forever. Nor is He merely saluting death as so many brave men have done before and since Good Friday. Nor is He merely saying goodbye to life, the years flashing swiftly before His mind, tired of Himself, tired of life, as Hamlet said, "To sleep, perchance to dream, - the rest is silence." No, it should be perfectly clear that this is the cry of a worker whose work was done, of a soldier whose warfare is ended, of a Savior whose work had been accomplished. We of the twentieth century must be especially sure of this. He has in His grip these days and these years and what we have done to Him and to one another. His is the power and the glory forever and ever.
For proof of this we can, of course, turn to the pages of Holy Writ to find echoes of His final cry. "Wherefore God has also highly exalted him and given him a name above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." There are many passages like this. Today, however, we should like to point to another proof which reflects the full meaning of His words, "It is finished." Let us turn for a moment to His enemies, to the indifferent, some of whom are in the churches of Christendom today. They are one of the great testimonies to His continuing power. They simply cannot leave Him alone! His enemies still hate him. Men do not hate the dead. Hate dies when the object hated dies. No one today hates Napoleon or Genghis Khan. Men no longer clench their fists against a Bismarck or stand guard over the tomb of a Nelson. But they still clench their fists against Christ and they still stand guard over His tomb. They say He is helpless and dead, but they pour out literature against Him and His Church. They build philosophies of government and life constructed to shut Him out. They clench their fists when His very name is mentioned. Why? Men do not fight ghosts. There are two kinds of faith—the saving faith of the redeemed and the protesting faith of the damned—and both of them always testify to the sign of power in Christ and His Cross.

With our Lord, however, it is totally different. We see evidence of His continuing power in the books His enemies write against Him, in their laughter over His Church, in their cynicism concerning the power of His Gospel. Day after day, as long as the world stands, His enemies testify to His mysterious hold over men and life and time.
Why? Francis Thompson in his *Hound of Heaven* writes a line which sums it all up. He points clearly to the reason why men still look at Him strangely as He passes by in life and in history. For time and eternity it is true, as Francis Thompson says, "All things betray thee who betray Me." That's it! All things betray man when he betrays his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. All the good things in life which He made, love and laughter and sunshine and health, become dust and myrrh and ashes without Him. On Good Friday more men and women know it than on any other day of the year. Perhaps that is the reason for the crowded churches. Once more they feel the strange, mysterious power of His words, "It is finished!"

We who by His grace and pity have made His victory our victory can now live on and by His cry, "It is finished." Our sins are now forgiven. Our souls are cleansed. Our consciences are clear and clean. Our incompleteness has ended in His final word. Our unfinished tasks and our broken lives are complete, finished and made whole by Him who loved us so much that He would rather die than be without us. His cry, "It is finished," makes it clear that we now, too, can join in His victory.

Every thoughtful man and woman knows that the greatest continuing and haunting sorrow of life is just its sense of incompleteness, of unfinished tasks, of things that we would like to do and cannot do. Life is full of loose ends and frayed edges. Of course, we often say, "This is done and finished," but what we mean to say is, "It is the best I can do just now. Perhaps some day I shall be able to do better." So the end of anything in life is never complete and final. Time and life are much too fluid for that.

Here, however, on the Cross we have in the long story of our incompleteness and imperfection one task that was done completely, finally and absolutely...
by any standard of measurement, human or divine. The work of our Lord
from the first cry in the manger to the last cry on the Cross was a divine
symphony coming to its final and inevitable end. "It is finished!" And with
the finishing of His task our sins are forgiven, and we stand before God in the
complete perfection of His atoning life and work.

II.

The second sentence is equally important. "Father, into thy hands I
commend my spirit." Here is something on which we can die. Men have
always been interested in the way humanity has met death. Men's dying words
are always significant. Shakespeare wrote: "Out, out brief candle, Life's
but a walking shadow." Goethe cried: "Light! More light!" Anatole France
said: "Draw the curtain; the farce is played out." Men have faced death
in protest or in shrugging acceptance. They have run the entire gamut of
emotions when they are face to face with the final and universal fact of life.

There is nothing like that in our Lord's last word. His head goes up
once more. He is now facing His heavenly Father alone. The crowd has
been forgotten. The pain of the crucifixion is almost in the past. He is coming
home now, the long adventure over, carrying in His hands the atonement
which He has made for all the sins of the world. In the great halls of heaven
cherubim and seraphim wait for Him, the tall lillies of heaven bend left and
right, and the choirs of eternity stand silent. He has commended His Spirit
into the hands of His heavenly Father. We know that all the angels rejoice
because the one poor thief with Him is the first of a long procession of men
and women who will storm the gates of heaven with His blood covering their
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love bringing them home. This is a great and goodly company. By faith in His atoning work we, too, can join them.

We have all seen a mother putting her child to bed. The child protests. It wishes to stay up just a little longer. There are so many things still to be done. And so, also, we, when the final word comes to us. Toward twilight we hear a voice saying to us: "Now put away your toys, the little things with which you worked in life, the patch-work of your plans and your dreams. It is time for you to say your prayers and go to sleep." We, too, shall ask for just a little more time, a few more hours.

But then something great and wonderful and eternal happen just as it happened to our Lord on Good Friday. We, too, will commend our spirit into the hands of our heavenly Father. And as for Him, so also for us, there will be another morning, the great morning of God. We shall wake up to see something very splendid and very beautiful. Flaming and glowing on the tapestries of heaven will be all the little things which we began to do and tried to do here on earth, cleansed, glorified and transfigured by Him who has preceded us, and who now pleads for us before the Throne of His heavenly Father throughout all of eternity. He has finished our little tasks for us. They have been finished by hands that once were torn by nails and that reached out for heaven at the last moment.

There is a great medieval picture of Calvary which tells this story better than mere words. At first glance it is the usual picture of the crowd and the three crosses. But over in the corner there is a man taking off his shoes! There is peace and joy on his face. He is taking off his shoes because here at Calvary he has come home. So in all the churches of Christendom today, all those that stand in the light of the Cross have come home to the
home of warmth and love and no loneliness at all. This is the power of the Cross also over the final fact of death.

It remains for us, as another Good Friday comes and goes, to tie all the loose ends together so that they can never break. Down in the gutter of the city street there is a drop of water, stagnant, soiled and dirty. From far up in the heavens the sun falls upon it, warms it, fills it through and through with its strange new life, lifts it up higher and higher, beyond the clouds. Then one day it falls as a snowflake, white and clean and pure, on a mountain top. This is the whole story of our life in Christ and with Christ. Our own lives often so soiled, so tawdry, to low and so worn can be lifted on the wings of the morning if we give them to Him who once was lifted up on Good Friday and who commended His spirit into the hands of His heavenly Father. We, too, can be lifted up until we walk the high places of the earth, unashamed and unafraid, living in the company of Him who died that we might have life and have it more abundantly, for His is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever and ever.

And so He now goes home to His Father on that first Good Friday; and, as we watch Him go, what shall we say? Perhaps only the old intimate words:

"Thy arms are strong around me, And I know
That somehow I shall follow where you go,
To the still land beyond the evening star
Where everlasting hills and valleys are.
And evil shall not hurt me anymore,
And terror shall be past, and grief and war."
"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Certainly there is no better and no greater way to die than that. This is the ultimate, final sign of the finality of the Cross.