

# The Seventh Word from the Cross

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*Good Friday reflection at St Paul's, 30 March 2018 (5–10 min); in response to Luke 23:46 and Luke 2:41-52*

Luke 2 tells us about the obedience of Mary and Joseph. They took baby Jesus to Jerusalem so that they could do “everything required by the law of the Lord” (2:39). As the firstborn male, he was presented to the Lord at the temple, and dedicated to God. A modern baby dedication gives the wrong idea. Sacrifices were made. Purifications were made. Jesus was consigned to the Lord, set apart as holy (2:23). Having done all this, as prescribed in the Law of Moses, the family went back to Nazareth, in Galilee, where “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (2:40).

Mary and Joseph would return to Jerusalem year after year, also out of obedience to the Law. The Mosaic Torah requires God’s chosen people to travel to Jerusalem, the place God chose to establish His temple, for the feast of Passover. Mary and Joseph did so faithfully, year after year according to St Luke, and the whole family came with them.

When Jesus was twelve, we are told, and unbeknownst to his parents, he stayed behind in Jerusalem after the Passover. It turned out that he was discussing theology – or, more precisely, discussing questions of Torah with the teachers of the law in the temple. Naturally, his absence caused “great anxiety” to Mary and Joseph. “Child,” said his mother when they found him, “why have you treated us like this?” (2:48). The boy’s reply is strange. “He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’” (2:49).

Mary and Joseph did not understand. His Father’s house? How could they know this? And, missing him, why should they not look for him? But the Gospel tells us two things about this episode. First, Jesus went home with them and “was obedient to them.” In all this he kept the commandment to obey his father and mother. Second, as was her habit, Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” (2:51).

On Good Friday we again find Jesus in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. On this

day Mary knows exactly where he is: according to John one of Jesus' words from the cross was addressed to her. But at this precise moment he is outside the Temple, outside the city even, consigned to the death of a criminal, having been condemned by the teachers of the law and by the state. What will happen now?

The women stand at a distance and watch (Luke 23:49). A man named Joseph takes the body down and lays it in a tomb, and the women see that it is done well (23:55–56). But who of those who witness these things can say what has become of Jesus?

According to Matthew and Mark, it seems as if Jesus is abandoned by his own Father in heaven. How can this be? Joseph and Mary would never have knowingly left their son behind. Will God now turn His back?

Luke's Gospel does not include Jesus' cry of dereliction, which quotes from Psalm 22. In some liturgical settings the church sings that Psalm today: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But it is not in Luke's account.

Perhaps Luke is uncomfortable with what the saying implies about God, or perhaps he simply has a different point to make. In any case, he draws our eyes to the perfect obedience of Jesus. The final word in his Gospel is another quote from psalm, with a subtle change.

The Psalmist states: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:5).

Jesus says from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Where God is at this moment we are not told. Is the Lord not with His anointed? Is the favor of God no longer upon Jesus, as it has been from his youth? Has the Father abandoned the Son? Perhaps. It certainly seems so. But Jesus also turns to the Father in spite of appearances. In obedience, in his death, he consigns himself to the Lord and Father of all.

Vindication will come in just three days. Recalling what Mary and Joseph hear from the boy Jesus – "Why were you searching for me?" – the women will hear something similar from an angel at the tomb, but still more amazing: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

The response of the women in the meanwhile is remarkable, because it mirrors the obedience of Jesus. Having arranged his body in the grave, what do they do? "On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Following the example of Jesus, they do not break faith.

On a day when we confront our own dark disobedience, let us consider the peerless work of Jesus Christ. On this day, at this hour, the Law of the Lord comes into sharpest focus. On this day, upon the cross, Jesus gathers to himself the despair and faith of Israel, and of us, and he offers them up to the Author of the Law in perfect obedience.

On this day, therefore, before we rejoice together in three days, when we remember and celebrate how the Lord has acted, let us now look to Jesus as the model of our own faith and obedience, feeble and imperfect as they are. With Christ as our head, let us offer our souls to him, and our grief, and with and through him let us pray this ancient psalm of David to God the Father: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."