

“Father, Into Thy Hands I Commend My Spirit”:

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Archie Smith, Jr., MSW, PhD

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:46

If you had grown up in my family, you would have gotten this message:

“If you borrowed something, then you were expected to put it back when you were finished.”

“If you took something off the shelf, you were expected to return it to the shelf.”

“Put it back where you got it from.”

If you got that message somewhere along the way, then you may understand a little bit of what is going on in this passage of scripture. The Divine Spirit, the breath of God, was being returned.

God was the lender. Jesus was the borrower. Jesus was the chosen and anointed vessel, the bearer of God’s presence. From the beginning of his ministry to the very end, Jesus was lead by the Divine Spirit. Hear these words:

“My soul rejoices in you, Yahweh, and my spirit dances within your presence, my God...” [Ann Johnson].

“The Spirit of The Lord is upon me,” He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the unsighted, to let the oppressed go free...” [Luke 4:18].

The Divine Spirit was in this Jesus, reconciling the world to God. “Into Thy Hands” are words that mark the completion of his ministry. A commitment made a long time ago was being work out to the end.

Jesus knew the joys of ministry, the times of sorrow, the demands of the crowd, the disappointments, ridicule, criticism, attempts to discredit him and the endless meetings. Hounded from country side to countryside, he had tried to teach a handful of people to be his disciples. Of them, one had betrayed him, another had denied him, none had understood him and all had fled. Then this: Father, into thy hands...!

Both Matthew and Mark’s gospel omit these words from the cross. Luke stands alone in giving us these words. And they are hard for us to believe. How

many times have we wondered about your own direction in life?, “Did I make a mistake?” “Did I take a wrong turn?” When we are disappointed, we may wonder, was my trust mis-placed?”

And, we may wonder about Jesus of Nazareth.

Does the loud cry from the cross mean that Jesus was in despair at the end of his ministry? Was the loud voice a cry of disillusionment? Was he wrong?

I do not think so! There is a profound irony at work in Jesus; crucifixion. God is amazingly present in his suffering and pain.

Jesus, the one faithful to the very end, commits his spirit to the same God who has been with him all along- through rejection and betrayal, through denial and persecution, through humiliation and crucifixion. It is to this God that Jesus prays, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

And at the very end of his life is the out-stretched hand of God to receive and hold him. Rome can do nothing more to him. It’s power has been broken and scattered. In the words of the Wisdom Literature, “The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and there no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.” (The Wisdom of Solomon 3:1)

We recall the words of the Psalmist:

“You are indeed my rock and my fortress;

for your name’s sake lead me and guide me,

take me out of the net that is hidden for me,

for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;

you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.” [Psalm 31:5]

Surely, for many of us, experiences of God’s silence or absence is real. God’s seeming silence may be real for the person who has loved and lost. God’s absence may be real for those who have known abuse and rejection. God may not be real to those who feel unprotected. The experience of God’s absent may be real to those who experience shame and humiliation, daily. God may be absent for the parent who has lost a child through tragic circumstances. The experience of divine abandonment is real, but it does not have final say.

The message from the Cross is that God, the Everlasting One, was in Christ's suffering, reconciling the world to the Divine Self.

As long as our trust is in things. Then the things in which we have placed our trust may satisfy for a short time, but they will disappoint us in the long run. They cannot answer the deepest hunger of the human Spirit. This same Jesus said to his followers,

“Blessed are you who are poor,

“for yours is the kingdom of God.”

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” [6:20-21].

“And woe to you who are full now,

for you will be hungry.” [Lk. 6:25]

This may be hard to believe.

This is jarring news in a society and culture that requires us to buy the latest fashion if we want to be happy and in the know.

This is jarring news for a people who have invested in material things. This is jarring news for those who place their own needs for safety and security above everything else.

This is jarring news in a world where words are cheap and commitments are easily broken.

This is jarring news in a world come of age- a world that thinks it can live lives without God.

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Luke 23:46.

We are put to the test with these words from the cross. A leap of faith is required. The God, whom we feel has abandoned us, the God who seems absent, is, in the end, the only God who is trust worthy. When we take that leap of faith, a leap into the unknown and beyond what we can see that is the moment, not of defeat, but of freedom from the things that have imprisoned us. It is the moment of solidarity with Jesus who went all the way.

What a radical commitment. It is a step into the unknown, and a act of utter trust. It goes against everything we have ever been taught. “Look before you leap!”, we are told. “Know what you are talking about before you speak.” “It is better to be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!” Jesus shows us a different way. It is a way that is hard to follow. Put your

ultimate trust in God. Put your Spirit in the hands of God. The Divine gift of life was being returned to the giver of life.

To some, God may seem far away, distant and untrustworthy when we are in deep pain. Confusion may cloud our memory of better times. The greed and evil that seems to be all around us may seem to have final say.

And this is why Luke's Gospel is important. At the end, a loud cry becomes a witness to God's presence. There is the moment of letting go and throwing oneself into the open hands of God.

When I was a child my uncle would take me and my siblings to the circus. The one thing we looked forward to with breath-taking amazement and fear were the flying trapeze performers. Two performers would climb separate poles and stand on separate platforms facing each other. They are high above the crowd. One performer was the catcher, the other was the caught. There was a hushed silence as both performers grabbed the trapeze bar and swung through the air toward each other. At the right moment the one to be caught would let go of the security of the trapeze bar. Without stretched arms that performer was waiting- in trust- to be caught. "The catcher", who hung on the trapeze bar by his or her knees, was to catch the performer in mid-air. This was a moment of sheer trust. The one performer threw her/himself into the hands of the catcher.

Father, into thy hand I commit my Spirit. Jesus Shows us the way.

For us, there is the moment of decision-making when we take on a difficult challenge—and seem to stand alone. There is another moment when we let go of what we are holding on to and with reckless abandon we throw ourselves in trust—into the hands of the faithful God.

God is the catcher. We are the caught. This is an act beyond words when we throw ourself into the strong and trusting hands of God.

"Father, into thy hand I commit my Spirit.

The life of Jesus does not end in a cry of despair. God is amazingly present in his suffering and pain. This is the profound hope that is being voiced. This is the profound hope that is available to you today!

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Trinity Episcopal Church, Sonoma.