

I recently discovered something astonishing about the last seven statements Jesus made before he died, which gives me a new perspective on this coming Good Friday. They are intrinsically linked to one another because all of them relate to the practice of hospitality. For someone facing imminent death it might seem like a strange choice of theme, but it is exactly what makes this particular death so significant.

In Jesus's first statement from the Cross, "Father, forgive them", he uses some of his last breaths to plead for God's grace to be shown to all who have conspired to kill him: strangers and enemies, Jews and Romans, soldiers hammering nails through his wrists as onlookers mocking and insulting him. Jesus asks his Father to welcome in hospitality even those who are murdering him.

Jesus's second phrase, "Today, you will be with me in paradise", is addressed to a criminal dying on a cross next to him. Amid extreme pain and suffering, Jesus offered words of comfort, privilege and belonging that a dying man could cling to. Jesus's hospitality of the outcast is a defining feature of his life: born in the presence of unknown shepherds, living surrounded by the marginalised and dying, offering hope, hospitality and a VIP welcome to a felon.

Jesus comforts his mother **with his third phrase: "Woman, receive your son"**. As if dying for the sins of the world were not a big enough task, even as he dies Jesus secures temporal hospitality for those closest to him. In words reminiscent of a legal adoption formula, Jesus announces to Mary that John is now her son and to John that Mary is his mother. In this simple act Jesus is promoting the hospitality that God has always advocated by "setting the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:6).

The **fourth statement from Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** is a cry of desolation. It's a quote from one of David's psalms, which seems to describe the crucifixion with uncanny accuracy: the ridicule and insults, his heart melting like wax, his thirst and the gambling for his clothes, and the isolation and despair. Somehow, mysteriously, Jesus was forsaken by his Father so that we could be forgiven. Here is the ultimate act of hospitality: Jesus was displaced from the presence of God so that we could be welcomed into it.

"I thirst," is Jesus' fifth phrase from the Cross. It is an ironic request from a man who once described himself as the water of life, who once provided wine for a wedding and once stilled the waters of the Sea of Galilee. The man who taught his disciples to quench the thirst of strangers as evidence of their love of God becomes that thirsty stranger in need of a drink. Jesus accepts wine vinegar from a stranger, accepting hospitality even at the darkest of moments.

The sixth statement is: "It is finished." Jesus's own suffering is finished. He has fully identified with the pain of humanity. The sacrifice has been completed. Humanity's captivity to sin is ended by the payment of a ransom. The Passover is finished as Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sins of the world. The decisive battle with evil is over because Jesus has conquered. Our exclusion from God's presence is finally ended, the door is thrown open wide. We can finally be welcomed home.

The seventh and final phrase is spoken as darkness falls: "Into your hands I commit my Spirit". These words demonstrate Jesus's unwavering trust in his Father. The words on Jesus's lips are borrowed from Psalm 31, in which David declares: "In you, Lord, I have taken refuge." In great personal distress, David seeks asylum in God's care. Now Jesus asks for the same hospitality from God.

Although he was on the receiving end of the greatest hostility that humanity could muster, Jesus turned the Cross into the place of greatest hospitality. The Cross offers faith for the doubter, hope for the despondent, belonging for the lonely and salvation for the lost. The Cross is not just a place of death, but a doorway to eternal life, a welcome into a relationship with God and an invitation to be part of this life of radical hospitality.

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