

LUKE 23.46: JESUS ON THE CROSS ENCOURAGES US TO TRUST GOD IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

From the beginning to the end of his life Jesus was a man of prayer.

- Immediately after he had been baptized in the river Jordan, Luke tells us that “**he was praying**” (Luke 3.21).
- Every day of his ministry seems to have been punctuated by prayer: in the words of Luke 5.16 Jesus “**would withdraw to deserted places and pray**”.
- And then on the cross we find Jesus praying. First he prayed for others “**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing** (Luke 23.34)”. And at the end he prayed for himself: “**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit**” (Luke 23.46).

It is this very last prayer of Jesus to which I now wish to turn your attention: “**Father, into your hands I place my spirit**” (Lk 23.46).

The first thing to notice is that this prayer was not original to Jesus.

Almost certainly Jesus was not making up a prayer of his own – rather he was quoting from Ps 31.5, where another sufferer entrusted himself to God.

As a boy Jesus would have learnt chunks of Scripture off by heart – and those chunks would certainly have included the Psalms.

For the Book of Psalms was the prayer book of the Jewish people. Jesus’ mind was steeped in the Psalms – so it was not surprising that Jesus used this prayer as he was dying.

As we shall see, it is a wonderful prayer for the dying to use – but it is not just a prayer for the dying. Originally it was a prayer for the living. Hence the title of my sermon: ‘Jesus on the Cross encourages us to trust God in life and in death’.

1. FOR THE PSALMIST IT WAS A PRAYER FOR THE LIVING

Let’s look first at the prayer Jesus used as we find it in Psalm 31.5: “**Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God**” (NRSV).

With the Cross in mind we tend to associate these words with dying – but actually the original context in Psalm 31 is about life rather than death.

In this respect the GNB translation is more helpful: “**I place myself in your care. You will save me, Lord; you are a faithful God**”

The GNB heads Psalm 31: “*A Prayer of Trust in God*”.

It is a prayer of an individual in considerable distress.

The theme of the Psalm is expressed in the very opening verse: “**In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me**”.

Clearly there were people out to get him: “**Take me out of the net that is hidden for me**” (v4). Precisely what was the nature of the trap, we don’t know.

All we do know is that he was surrounded by enemies galore. “**I hear the whispering of many – terror all around – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life**” (v13).

Goodness, you can see parallels with what the life of Jesus here. People had been out to get him – for months they had been plotting to take his life – and now there he was on a cross, surrounded by enemies. No wonder his mind went to this psalm.

But to return to the Psalmist. He turns to God. And as he turns to God, he discovers with a great sense of relief that God is there to protect him. **"Into your hand I commit my spirit"** (NRSV) or as the GNB puts it: **"I place myself in your care. You will save me, Lord, you are a faithful God"** (v5).

The Psalmist gains confidence, not because his circumstances have changed, but because he realises that God can be trusted.

The result is that this Psalm, which is born of that experience, was written and has been described as *"a model of a prayer that is confident of being heard"*.

Look at vv14,15: **"I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God'. My times are in your hands"**. Or as the GNB puts it, **"I am always in your care"**.

The words of Paul to Timothy come to mind: **"I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him"** (2 Tim 1.2)

Yes, the Psalmist was confident that God cared for him, and because God cares, he believed that God would save him from his enemies and from the downfall that they were plotting.

It is important to notice that the salvation of which the Psalmist spoke was limited to this world: it was salvation from death, rather than in death.

Whereas Jesus when he prayed this prayer was entrusting himself into God's hands with death in view, the Psalmist had life in view.

The Psalmist knew nothing about life beyond the grave. For him **"Sheol"** (31.17), the world of the dead, was a place from which there was no exit.

For the Psalmist, therefore, this is a prayer for the living.

"Into your hand I commit my spirit".

To speak of the **"hand"** of God is to engage in what the theologians call anthropomorphic language, i.e. to speak of God as if he were human.

God, of course, is spirit; he has no hands. But because we are human and our minds are limited by human concepts, we find it easier to speak of God in human terms.

When we speak of the hands of God, we think of God's care.

My mind goes to the children's song: *"He's got the whole wide world in his hands... He's got everybody here in His hands...He's got the tiny little baby in his hands... He's got you and me, brother, in His hands."*

God's hands are strong hands - and so to commit ourselves into the hands of God brings an enormous sense of relief - we can feel at ease - we know that God is in control.

This too was the conviction of the Psalmist. **"I place myself in your care. You will save me, Lord; you are a faithful God"** (GNB)

2. FOR JESUS IT WAS A PRAYER FOR THE DYING

In the mouth of Jesus this prayer for the living becomes a prayer for the dying. For according to Luke these are the very last words he says: "**Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!' Having said this, he breathed his last**".

There are a number of things to notice:

1. **First** of all, notice the timing: "**Then** – i.e. at the end of the three hour period of darkness; at the point at which "**the curtain of the temple was torn in two**" (23.45) – Jesus cried out to God

Almost certainly Luke sees a link between the tearing of the temple curtain and the prayer of Jesus. Alas, there is a degree of uncertainty about what happened.

- In the first instance, scholars argue over which of the two temple curtains it was: was it the inner curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple; or was it the outer temple which kept Jewish women and all Gentiles from the centre of worship?
- Then there is the issue whether the destruction of the curtain was a sign of God's impending judgment on Jerusalem, or whether the destruction symbolized that through the Cross had had opened up a new way to worship him, where all were welcome.

2. **Secondly**, notice the contrast between the cry of Jesus and the cries that were normally heard from a cross. Scholars tell us that what made crucifixions particularly gruesome were "the screams of rage and pain, the wild curses and the outbreaks of nameless despair" that came from the lips of the victims.¹ But Jesus didn't curse, Jesus didn't rage, Jesus prayed and entrusted himself to God. When Jesus cried out "**with a loud voice**" he was expressing his confidence and trust in God. This was not a scream to run shivers down the spine, this was a shout of triumphant faith

3. **Thirdly**, notice that the words Jesus used in his cry to God were more than just a quotation from Ps 31.5. For Jesus does what the psalmist does not: he prefaces the words "**into your hands I place my spirit**", with the word, "**Father**".

Throughout his life Jesus was deeply conscious of the Fatherhood of God.

In Luke's account of the life of Jesus the very first words of Jesus are: "**Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?**" (Luke 2.49).

Luke records that the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples began not with the words '**Our Father in heaven**' (Matt 6.9), but with the simple word '**Father**' (Luke 11.3). Now, here, his very last words on the cross are a call to God his Father

What is more, and most significantly, when Jesus addressed God as Father, he used that most intimate of Aramaic words, "**Abba**".

This word is extraordinarily difficult to translate into English.

'Daddy' gets the familiarity right, but for some people it is too juvenile a word.

Maybe 'Father, dear Father' gets near to the thrust of a word.

¹ Blinzer, *The Trial of Jesus*

It is an intimate family word.

Until Jesus came, no Jew had ever dared to use this word of God.

"Father, dear Father into your hands I commend my spirit".

As Jesus was dying, he knew that he could entrust himself with total confidence to his Father who cared for him.

The Greek word (*paratithemi*) translated in the NRSV as 'commend' means to 'entrust' oneself to the safekeeping of another. **"God is faithful"**, said Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1.9) – he can be trusted both in this life and the next to take care of us.

4. **Fourthly**, notice that Jesus entrusts his very self to God. The term '**spirit**' is not to be spiritualized and understood of some disembodied entity. It is a term for life itself. So Peterson in *The Message*: "Father, I place my life in your hands" Literally the underlying Greek (and Hebrew) word for 'spirit' (*pneuma/ruah*) means 'breath'. So literally Jesus said: 'Father give my breath back to you'. Thereupon Luke says **"he breathed his last"**. He gave the life that God had given him back to God.
5. **Fifthly**, notice how Jesus is very much in charge as he dies. **"I commend my spirit"**. Jesus, when he commends his spirit to God, is not giving in or giving up, he is giving himself to God.
For the past 12 hours or so, Jesus has been in the hands of sinful men and women. Now he takes his life into his own hands and lays his life into the hands of his Father. Jesus does not let his crucifiers have the last word or determine the significance of his death. Having given his life for the world, he now gives his life to the Father. In the words we find in John's Gospel: **"it is finished"** - his mission is accomplished. Jesus' final prayer is "one of total submission and complete peace".²

3. A PRAYER TO USE FOR OUR LIVING

So what has all this to say to us?

I believe that in the first place we can use these words as a prayer for our living.

We do not have to wait until death draws near to pray this prayer.

Rather we can use this prayer in the here and the now.

Like the Psalmist, we can use this prayer in time of trouble.

We can use this prayer when everything in life seems to be against us.

In those times we can confidently commit ourselves into the good hand of God.

We can place ourselves in the care of God - his hands are strong enough to hold on to us, whatever life may throw at us.

He will save us - he is a faithful God!

We can use this prayer at every stage of our live

- When everything seems to be on top of us – we can entrust to God the burdens we carry, the concerns we have for our loved ones, the plans we are making, the challenges we face.
- We can make this a prayer for everyday – at the beginning of the day, even perhaps before

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Apollos, Nottingham 2015) 696.

we get out of bed, we can pray, "Father, into your hands we commit the day that lies ahead".

- At the end of the day, as we pull the duvet over us, we can allow all the worries of the day to recede as we pray "Father, into your hands we commit the day that is past with all its concerns".

Yes, on a daily basis we can look to the future with confidence, for God is with us.

In the words of Ps 31.15 "**My times are in your hand**".

At this point I am reminded of some lines of Robert Browning, which Caroline's grandmother often used to quote:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His Hand
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'"³

It doesn't matter at what stage we are at in life, we can look forward with confidence

- If we are young, and have many years of life stretching ahead before us, years full of opportunity to serve Christ in his world, we can be confident - the best is yet to be
- But so too is the best yet to be when we are in middle life, with all the responsibilities which those years bring to most of us
- And so too is the best yet to be when we are old - for when we are old there should be a depth of living not known in younger days, there should be a maturity of relationships far richer than those enjoyed in youth or in middle age.

4. A PRAYER TO USE FOR OUR DYING

But these words of Browning can have a wider reference.

"*The best is yet to be*" - even beyond the river of Jordan, the river of death.

David Watson, a charismatic Anglican evangelist who worked so effectively in the 1970s, fought a long battle with cancer. As he faced death, he wrote to his friends and quoted Browning: "*The best is yet to be*". Indeed, that is the title of the last chapter of his biography.

So let us consider Psalm 31.5 as a prayer for our dying.

Jesus was the first of many to use these words with death in view

- Luke, e.g. tells us that as Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit**" (Acts 7.59) - into your hands I commit my spirit.
- Stephen in turn was followed by many believers who used this prayer of Jesus to take leave of this life.

The fact is that with Jesus we can face death with confidence

For Jesus has "**broken the power of death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel**" (2 Tim 1.10 GNB)

Death need no longer be feared.

But do we believe it? What for you would be an ideal way of dying?

³ Robert Browning, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*

Many people today hope that they will die without knowing they are dying. They don't just want to die quickly and painlessly, they want to die thoughtlessly, not knowing that it is the end.

But is dying in one's sleep really a good death?
Is dying drugged up to the eyeballs the best way of dying?
I hope to be conscious when I die, surrounded by loved ones, hearing the familiar words of Scripture, and strengthened perhaps with bread and wine, as I look forward to banquet that is to come.

For Christians death is not to be feared.
Indeed, according to Francis of Assisi, death can be welcomed as a friend

*And thou most kind and gentle death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise him! alleluia
Thou leadest home the child of God,
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod,
Alleluia!*

It is true that those things which accompany death can be less than welcome - the weakness, the helplessness, the dependency upon others.

Nor is the separation from loved ones welcome either.

But death itself? Death can be faced, because it leads us but into the presence of God
"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"

At some stage the Jews developed the custom of using Psalm 31.5 in their evening prayers. It is a little uncertain as to whether this was already the custom in Jesus' day, but if it was, then its quotation by Jesus on the Cross could have had special significance.

For "Jesus who died at the ninth hour (three o'clock in the afternoon) recited this prayer at the moment the trumpets were sounded for the evening prayer, the end of which was precisely 'Into your hands I commit my spirit'. Joining the people in their evening prayer, Jesus expressed his confidence and certainty that his death was only a 'going to sleep', and therefore the beginning of life with the Father" (Hendrickx)

Sleep is a well-known metaphor for death.

Beyond the metaphor there is the reality that those who have entrusted themselves to the care of God, will wake up to enjoy the presence of God, for ever and ever.

He will save us - he is a faithful God!

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit". At this point I am reminded of a talk to the dying given by Norman Autton, a hospital chaplain:

"Death is not so much something that happens to us as rather something we do. It's a sort of self-abandonment, a total giving up of ourselves, a complete emptying of ourselves... In dying we give back all that we are and all that we have... I wonder if you've read *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien. If so, you'll probably remember Aragorn, the noble king approaching old age and realising that the span of his life-days is drawing to an end. He says to Arwen, his wife, 'At last, Lady Evenstar, fairest

[Luke 23.46]

in this world and most beloved, my world is fading. Lo! We have gathered and we have spent, and now the time of payment draws near...' And he then adds this beautiful phrase: 'To me has been given, not only many years but also the grace to go at my will, and give back the gift'." ⁴

How these words contrast with Dylan Thomas;

"Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at the close of day;
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light." ⁵

There is no need to rage. Death is not the end of life, but simply the beginning of life. We can with confidence pray: "**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit**".

Whether in life or in death we can trust God
Yes, at every stage of life God is a God to be trusted. We can entrust ourselves with full confidence to him. For he is a God who loves us – and there is nothing in this world or the next which can ever separate us from his great love in Jesus.

⁴ Norman Autton, *Peace At the Last. Talks With The Dying* (SPCK, London 1978) 114

⁵ Written in 1947: see *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The New Centenary Edition*.(Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2014).