

Seven Last Words: The Second

Last Sunday, we began a Pastor Column series on the Seven Last Words of Christ from the Cross: the seven last things that Jesus said before He died. This is a series of reflections that is borrowed from the Venerable Fulton Sheen and his classic book, *Life of Christ*.

The Seven Last Words actually are an ancient devotion that in recent years has been making a comeback. We are often fascinated by somebody's final words, and often those words are an indication of that person's final thoughts and character before finally dying.

And so it is with Jesus. But of course, He is far more than just "somebody" but in fact is the Lord, the Word-Made-Flesh, the Son of God and Son of Man. In the fullness of His humanity, He is also representative of all humanity. In the hour of His highest earthly glory (the hour of His death), He speaks His Seven Last Words from the greatest pulpit ever mounted by any preacher: the pulpit of His Cross. There was never a preacher like the dying Jesus; there was never a congregation like that which gathered about the pulpit of the Cross; there was never a sermon like the Seven Last Words.

Last week, the First was "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." (Lk 23:34) And the Second: Jesus said to the repentant thief, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Lk 23:43)

The Last Judgment was prefigured on Mount Calvary; the Judge was in the center, and the two divisions of humanity were on either side: the saved and the lost; the sheep and the goats. When He comes again "in glory to judge the living and the dead" (Nicene Creed), the Cross will be with Him then, too, but as a badge of honor, not of shame.

Two thieves were crucified on either side of Him, and at first, they blaspheme and curse. Suffering does not necessarily make us better; it can sear and burn the soul, unless we are purified by seeing its redemptive value. Unspiritualized suffering may cause us to degenerate. The thief at the Lord's left was certainly no better because of pain. The thief on the left asked to be taken down. But the thief on the right, evidently moved by the Lord's prayer of intercession (the First Last Word), asked to be taken up. Reprimanding his brother thief for his blasphemy, he said to him, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." (Lk 23:40-41) And then throwing himself upon Divine Mercy, he asked Jesus for mercy: "Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom." (Lk 23:42)

A dying man asked a fellow dying Man for eternal life; a man without possessions asked a poor Man for a Kingdom; a thief at the door of death asked to die like a thief and steal Paradise. One would have thought that a *saint* would have been the first soul purchase over the counter of Calvary by the red coins of Redemption, but in the Divine plan it was a *sinner*, a thief, who was the escort of the King of kings into Paradise. If the Lord had come merely as a teacher, the thief never would have asked for forgiveness. But since the thief's request touched upon the very reason of His coming to Earth, namely, to save souls, the thief was given the immediate answer: "Amen, I say to you, today, you will be with Me in Paradise."

It was the thief's last prayer, perhaps even his first. He knocked once, sought once, asked once, dared everything, and found everything. When even the disciples were doubting and only one was present at the foot of the Cross, the thief owned and acknowledged Him as Savior. If Barabbas came to the execution, how he must have wished that he never had been released, and that he could have heard the words of the compassionate High Priest. Practically everything about the Body of Christ was fastened by nails, or tortured by whips and thorns, except His Sacred Heart and His proclaiming mouth – and these declared forgiveness that very day. But who can forgive sins, but God? And who can promise Paradise, but Him Who by nature is eternal and so is the One to Whom Paradise belongs?