

## Seven Last Words: The Third

We continue with this 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 are an ancient devotion that in recent years has been making a comeback.

In the hour of His highest earthly glory (the hour of His death), Jesus 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, nor was there ever 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 Second of the Seven Last Words was what Jesus said to the repentant thief, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Lk 23:43)

And now, the Third: Jesus said to His Mother, indicating Saint John (who was there with her at the foot of the Cross), "Woman, behold, your son." And He said to Saint John, "Behold, your mother."

The Third Word contains exactly the same word that He used in addressing His Mother at Cana, at the wedding feast: "Woman." Then, at Cana, Jesus said, "Woman, how does your concern affect Me? My hour has not yet come." The *hour*, of course, refers to the hour of His glory, which (irony of ironies) took place at the precise hour of His death on the Cross. And so, *woman* and *hour* make very clear for us that Cana and the Cross are intimately connected. And these two episodes in the life of Jesus just happen to be the "book-ends" of the Gospel narrative of Saint John.

Cana was three years before the Cross in the life of Our Blessed Lord. Three years hence, He now looks down from the Cross to the two most beloved creatures that he had on Earth: His Blessed Mother and His Apostle Saint John. He picks up the refrain, as it were, of Cana and addresses His Mother with the same title that He gave her at Cana: "Woman."

"Woman, behold, your son." He was speaking of Saint John, but he mentions no name. For in his anonymity in this moment, Saint John stands for all of humanity. And then to him (that is, to all of humanity), Jesus says, "Behold, thy mother."

Here is the answer, after all the years that have elapsed since the Archangel Gabriel spoke to Mary at the Annunciation – the answer to those mysterious Gospel words pertaining to the Incarnation, that the

Blessed Mother laid her *first-born* in the manger. She was mother only to Jesus (the first *and* the last, as He Himself declares in the Book of Revelation), but to our hearing, "first-born" might seem to indicate that other children followed. But did she have other children? Most certainly she had other children – but not according to the flesh. Jesus alone is the unique Son of the Blessed Mother according to the flesh. But Saint John (and all of *us* with him) are children of the Blessed Mother in the order of the spirit.

At the Cross, Mother Mary became our mother the very moment when she lost her first-born Son; and what seemed an alienation of affection during His three years of public ministry was in reality a deepening of affection. No love ever mounts to a higher plane without death to a lower one; Mary died to the love of Jesus at Cana, and she recovered Jesus again at Calvary with His Mystical Body, the Church, which He redeemed.

This may seem a very poor exchange – exchanging Jesus for fallen, broken humanity; exchanging Christ the Bridegroom for the Church His Bride. She gave up her Son to win humanity. But in very truth, she did not win humanity apart from Him but in cooperation with Him. And this otherwise poor exchange is, again, in very truth, a rich one: she lost her Son, yes, but only to gain Him again, along with everyone else besides. She is Mother of Christ *and* Mother of the Church.

This is a new love for her, of course, or perhaps the same love expanded over the wider realm of all humanity. And it was not without its sorrow. It cost Mary something great to have all of humanity for sons and daughters. She could give birth to Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, but she could give birth to Christians only at the Cross on Calvary, with labor pains so great so as to make her the Queen of Martyrs. The bitterness of Eve's curse (that woman who could only bring forth children in sorrow and pain) was now fulfilled in Mary, and not by the opening of the women but by the piercing of her heart by the seven swords of sorrow, which Simeon foretold. It was the greatest of all honors to be the Mother of Christ; it was also a great honor to be the mother of Christians. There was no room in the inn for that first birth; but Mary had the whole world for her second.

The import of this Third Word would be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when Christ's Mystical Body became visible and operative. Mary as the Mother of a redeemed and regenerated humanity was in the midst of the Apostles on that fateful day.

~ Fr. Lewis