

“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said ‘**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit**’. Having said this, he breathed his last.”

Is it really any wonder to us?

Think on it. Use your imagination, and put yourself in his place for a moment.

We are all human. With many of us and our aging aches and pains, sometimes it is all we can do to get out of a soft, warm bed in the morning. For others of us who are younger and might be firmer of body, we have our days as well...when the school bus comes too early, or we wake up stiff from yesterday’s game, or just physically did more than we planned or expected to.

So, having heard everything that Jesus went through, do we really wonder? The arrest in earliest part of the day. The abandonment by his loved ones, and the denial by others. The condemnation by the screaming crowd, wanting his blood to flow. The trials before all authority figures, and the rejection. The hatred. The humiliation. The spitting. Flogging. Stripping. And then....three hours. Hanging there in physical agony. With nothing but nails holding your body’s weight up there.

God knows Jesus was worn out.

Do we really wonder about his giving up his spirit? The surrender of his soul?

And, what is God’s response to the cross of Jesus?

His first response is for darkness to fall upon the earth. What a contrast! Scripture tells us that the first act of God in creation is to bring light. Physical light, followed by the spiritual light of Jesus as the embodied Word of God. The gospels are jammed with reference to Jesus as the light of the new covenant, the one who shows us “the way” to righteousness...or being right with God, and how we can be “followers of the Way”, which was the name by which the earliest Christians were known.

But, at this moment in time, God now brings darkness upon creation. He brings darkness because sin is being atoned for, and God the Father responds to the cross by also abandoning Jesus. By separating from Jesus.

Yet, there is another response by God to the cross.

Before Jesus had spoken the Seventh Word, before he had given up his spirit to God the Father, St. Luke tells us that the curtain of Temple was torn in two. “So what?”, we wonder. “What is the significance of that?” Why does Scripture take us away from the cross on the hill at Golgotha, to some side bar event somewhere else?

The only part of this temple still standing in the city of Jerusalem is the western wall, otherwise known as the “Wailing wall” where we Jews are continually bowing in prayer. If you have seen that image on television, use your imagination again....imagine the second temple built on the site of the Temple Mount, the original location of the first Great Temple of Solomon.

In this great temple, there was a place called the Holy of Holies, which was the designated meeting place...the only meeting place....between a Holy God and a sinful people. The curtain referred to prevented un-holy people from entering the Holy house of God. One day a year...the Great Day of Atonement...the Great High Priest was permitted by Jewish law to enter this place with awe and trembling to make the sacrifice for the sins of the people.

But now, with Jesus crying out on the cross, God tears the great curtain in two. No longer will God allow such an artificial barrier to keep God’s people away because Jesus...as the Christ, the Holy Anointed One of God...is the only mediator between God and God’s people.

So, with that part of his journey now completed, Jesus was ready to go home...and he goes home, not with a whisper or a whimper, but a loud voice for all to hear: "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit!"

If you care to, open the Book of Common Prayer before you to page 622....to Psalm 31. And, if you look at verse 5, you will find this very same statement, except Jesus added the word, “Father”.

That verse...”into your hands, I commit my spirit”...was the prayer that every Jewish mother taught her child to say the last thing at night. Just as we were taught, maybe, to say, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep,’ so the Jewish mother taught her child to say, before the threatening dark came down, ‘Into your hands, I commit my spirit.’ Jesus made it even more intimate, for he began it with the word “Father”.

Even on the cross, Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his father's arms. At the end, Jesus did not speak large words or deep theological truths, but instead the words among the first prayers he ever learned, giving great comfort to his soul in his last moments. All in testimony to what life is about....beginning life with God, and completing his earthly journey with God as well.

In this prayer, we see that it is a prayer of Communion with God, it is a Prayer of Confidence in the power of God, and finally it is a Prayer of Commitment--Jesus entrusting God to prosper the work he had done by deposited his soul, his love, his life with God the Father. Our lenten study this season focused on the care of our souls, and for those of us who participated in that, we have a better understanding.

That is a perspective of indescribable closeness, of unimaginable intimacy, that we are not used to in our Western civilization and cultural world of contemporary theology. Since about the year 1,000, upon the feared coming of the millennium, the greater church had moved into a cosmic relational view of God as Judge. Being remote from us. Primarily wielding power, in majesty. Too far from us, from our daily lives, from our joys and from our fears...and the church followed in that journey.

But prior to that, dating back many centuries, and still continuing in the Eastern churches of our brothers and sisters, is instead the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life...that springs forth in our earliest Scriptures in the Garden of Eden within Genesis, and is cited in the terminating Scriptural images of the Book of Revelation. The Tree of Life...signifying all that God had always intended for us, in the fullness of our being, in the closeness of our relationship with him, in the very business of healing that is God's.

Well, today is the day, because in between the beginning of Genesis and the ending visions of Revelation, the cross becomes the Tree of Life...on this very anniversary day. The cross becomes our Tree of Life, our window through which we can pass through back and into that garden where we can again walk with our Lord God in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.

Now, it is our turn...if, in fact, God puts it into our hearts within our lifetimes to give our hearts back to God. As we of the church are now the body of Christ, we are possessors of a double life, having taken our friend's life and nature into ourselves. Repeating what I shared yesterday, God rides inside of us, in our blood streams straight to our hearts where the covenant is written: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people."

The death of Jesus cannot be overlooked, nor should it be. But it is the life...the life from God that is being offered, the life that rushes out to us. It is the promise of God from before time and forever, spelled out this time in flesh and blood. It is the new covenant and the last one: new because it is offered to us fresh each day, and the last one because there is nothing more that God can say or do.

This is as close as God can get: blood kin, indissoluble union, friend bound to friend for life, forever.

So, it is our turn. Today, this Good Friday afternoon, we have prayed...and sung...and pondered the meaning and the mystery of the Cross. Now, let the cross, as the Tree of Life, do its work. Pick it up and carry it onward, praying along with Jesus, "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit."...and let us follow Jesus, as the Christ, the Anointed One of God, on our own journey in the company of the eternal God self-revealed to us as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.