

Into Your Hands – The Meaning Of Life in Seven Words

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The Gospel According to St. Luke 23:44-46

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“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

There’s something in these words so gentle, so like a child’s bedtime prayer, they feel out of place in the cruel scene before us.

This suffering, bleeding, suffocating man on the cross, has just cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (a phrase we will come back to on Maundy Thursday). And now, struggling for his last few breaths, he says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” It is almost as though he is praying, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”

Suffering, innocent humanity (if that is possible to imagine) has cried out, asking “Why, why?” Christ has given voice to a whole creation cruelly used and abused. Now, beyond even the cries of dereliction and lamentation, he lets go of the last thing he held, his last breath, his spirit, and asks God to receive it.

Christ’s attention is no longer focused on comforting the crucified man beside him, or caring for the mother at the foot of the cross, or asking the psalmist’s questions of God. He is a child again, God’s child, letting go, and entrusting himself to God.

Some months ago I came across a poem by a poet I didn’t know.

The Niagara River, by Kay Ryan

As though
the river were
a floor, we position
our table and chairs
upon it, eat, and
have a conversation.
As it moves along,
we notice — as
calmly as though
dining room paintings
we’re being replaced —
the changing scenes
along the shore. We
do know, we do
know this is the
Niagara River, but
it is hard to remember
what that means.

That repeated assurance of consciousness: "We do know, we do know this is the Niagara River." We *do* know.

We are aware, aren't we, aren't we all, that we are in the flow of an ever changing flood of life? Movement, mutability, impermanence, change characterize this life in which we have been plunged at birth. And, "we do know, we *do* know" that up ahead there will be rapids, lots and lots of rapids, and a very long fall.

"We do know, we *do* know." But it is as though we forget. It is just so hard to remember, sitting here, dining, talking with one another calmly as the river flows along with us riding upon it, it is just so hard to remember what it means that we live and move and have our being in this river.

But Christ never lost consciousness of this reality. He did know and he did remember that every breath he took, every spark of life that enlightened his spirit, every beat of his heart, every movement of his soul, were given by the hand of God. And this same God, whom he trusted for every breath, every beat of his heart, could be trusted now as the rapids gave way to the falls. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

This moment with Jesus on the cross becomes so intimate as he speaks these words. They are such human words, but placed on the lips of Jesus Christ, they assume a proportion that somehow reaches through time and space and includes you and me.

Carlyle Marney has said that Christ died because we have to die. This is what it means, in part, to be human. So, Marney says, "He became a man and followed manhood to the end of the track. And just where we, too, can no longer see anything, by an act of faith he turned the outcome of his venture over to the Father."

Our daughter, Jessica, as a small child was blessed with sweetest little glow of rosy cheeks through an alabaster complexion. Her hazel eyes danced in a frame of blond hair, but it was that almost transparent complexion with the rosy cheeks that took you by surprise and made you smile. Lots of children in Scotland looked much the same. The combination of diffused (or absent) sunlight and cool temperatures tend to make some children look that way.

What we didn't know, what we didn't learn until we moved back to the States, was that Jessica's paleness and rosy cheeks weren't just the result of a northern climate, but of a faulty mitral valve in her heart. When our family doctor discovered this, and sent us to the Houston Heart Institute where it was confirmed, a world of memories flooded back. And right along with the memories tagging along like a mischievous nephew prying open every hidden cupboard was the guilt.

We remembered dragging this child all over Paris and London, and when she looked out of breath, saying "Keep up sweetie! There's lots more to see!" As Debbie reminisced guiltily on the way home from the hospital in Houston where we met with the pediatric cardiologists, I looked into the backseat at Jessica playing quietly, and I said, "Sweetie, this would probably be a good time for you to ask for a pony."

Well, Jessica didn't get a pony, but she was the only child in her third grade class who got open heart surgery that year.

Debbie and I took turns sleeping in her hospital room in the days leading up to the surgery. It so happened that the night before surgery, it was my turn to sleep on the cot next to her.

Just before going to sleep, I took out my old Book of Common Prayer and prepared to say the evening prayers. I asked if she would like to join me and she said yes. So I prayed through the daily office with Jessica, through the Psalms appointed to that day, and ended with the prayers from the family prayer section of the Book that I always included. The last of those prayers is the one that goes like this:

"Most loving Father, we commend those whom we love to your never failing care in this life and in the life to come, knowing that thou art doing for them better things than we can ask or imagine."

When I finished the prayer, and we both said amen, I kissed Jessica good night. I turned out the light, and, knowing that this would be a short night, and they would be taking her to surgery very early, we both prepared to go to sleep. In a few minutes, the silence was broken by her little voice.

"Daddy, were you placing me in God's hands right then in that prayer?"

I said, "Yes. That's exactly what I was doing."

After a moment, she said, "Good."

It is, I think, significant that among Jesus' last words from the cross, there is this simple, childlike act of trust, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

At whatever points along the way, we become conscious of life's flux and fragility, this is the prayer, intimate, childlike, an act of pure trust for that which is to come.

Amen.