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Jesus' last words provide nonviolent inspiration on Good Friday

John Dear | Apr. 3, 2012 On the Road to Peace

On Good Friday, we stand with the nonviolent Jesus as he suffers torture and execution at the hands of the empire, yet remains centered in the God of love, forgiving and nonviolent to the end. Gandhi said that in his death, Jesus practiced perfect nonviolence. He teaches us not only how to suffer and die, but becomes a spiritual explosion of disarming love that is still transforming us all. This Holy Week, we might listen to the words of Jesus from the cross, as offered in the four Gospels, for clues about following him faithfully on the way of nonviolence in pursuit of justice and peace. Here are the famous seven last sayings of the crucified, nonviolent Jesus.

"Father forgive them, they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Throughout his humiliation, torture and public execution, Jesus never yells, shows anger, threatens anyone, condemns anyone or says a word of violence, vengeance or retaliation. He enters into universal compassion for the entire human race, in perfect solidarity with everyone who suffers and dies throughout history, and so explodes into universal love.

Jesus reaches the heights of nonviolence by forgiving his executioners. He remains focused on the God of love, and appeals to God to forgive us all. He says in effect, "The violence stops here in my body. You are all forgiven, but the days of killing are over." How does he do that? I think he can do this because he focused his energy on his compassionate God at every moment of his life. With this focus, he forgave everyone who hurt him, every day, every step along the way. Forgiveness had become his daily spiritual practice, a way of life for him, so that even as he was being killed, he could forgive. It had become second nature to him.

Forgiveness is at the heart of nonviolence. It's our entry into God's reign of peace and love. We can't enter into that realm of peace and love without forgiving everyone who has ever hurt us. Forgiving those who hurt us is not a one-time event. We have to forgive by name everyone who ever hurt us, every step of the way, every day. That means we are constantly forgiving. Forgiveness becomes part of our daily spiritual practice, too.

This is nothing new. In Mark's Gospel (11:24-25), just before his arrest, Jesus tells his followers that every time they come before God in prayer, they must forgive those who hurt them. That's also at the center of the Lord's Prayer.

Good Friday is a good time to accept that we are forgiven, to forgive ourselves and to forgive everyone who ever hurt us. If we can practice this forgiveness daily in small ways, we might be able to forgive those who hurt us in big ways, and go to our deaths, like Jesus, in a spirit of peace and compassion.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:2)

Jesus cries out to God, asking why God has so thoroughly rejected and abandoned him. It certainly appears that God has forsaken him. But notice: He still addresses God. Even as he dies innocently in a brutal public

execution and feels that abandonment to the depth of his being, he speaks directly to God. He's still living in relationship with his beloved God. That's the key to his perfect nonviolence, his universal love, his boundless compassion. Up until his last breath, Jesus remains focused on God. That's what we have to do as well.

That may seem like a stretch, but any first-century reader of Luke's Gospel would immediately recognize this famous question as the beginning of Psalm 22, a long prayer that moves from despair, pain and abandonment into hope, victory and fulfillment. Indeed, by the end, it becomes a joyful celebration of resurrection.

Luke invites us into the spirit of Psalm 22, to tap into our Good Friday feelings of despair and abandonment as we work for justice and peace and to move slowly with Jesus into new hope and possibility.

"Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43)

Luke tells of two violent revolutionaries executed alongside Jesus. One mocks Jesus, and the other defends him, saying "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Earlier, James and John asked to be at the right and left hand of Jesus, but he tells them that those places of honor are reserved by God. Here, we finally learn who is at his right and left hand -- violent revolutionaries, executed for trying to overthrow the Roman Empire. Does this mean Jesus sides with those in permanent resistance to empire and war, even as he remains nonviolent? Perhaps.

Even as he dies, Jesus ministers to the poor, the condemned and the dying. He promises he will be in paradise with him. Perhaps both will join him in paradise. As followers of Jesus, we too are invited to side with those in resistance to empire, to show compassion to the poor, the condemned and the marginalized -- and of course, to work for the abolition of the death penalty.

Today in paradise? Sometimes I wonder if Luke infers that being next to Jesus, even in this Good Friday agony, near his perfect nonviolence, means they are already in paradise, even as they die. If we too side with the condemned, the suffering and the dying, we too are already with Christ in paradise.

"Woman, behold your son. Behold your mother." (John 19:26-27)

The Gospels make it clear that women stood by the dying Jesus. The men are certainly portrayed as terrified, fearful that they too could be arrested and killed -- which apparently did happen to them later on. Perhaps the men couldn't stand by the cross because they would have been immediately arrested by the authorities and crucified as his accomplices, while the women would not have been arrested. In any case, the women are faithful to Jesus, and follow him even to his death and burial.

We too need to stand like the holy women, and Mary and John, with the crucified peoples of the world. Sometimes, that's all we can do -- just be there and share their powerlessness. That compassionate, powerless presence of loving solidarity can offer some comfort.

Here in John's account, Mary and Jesus' beloved disciple John stand nearby. Jesus takes cares of Mary by telling his beloved friend John to look after her. But I wonder if we have misread this text. Sometimes I don't think Jesus is saying, "Mother, here is your new son, my friend John, who will look after you." That may be true, but he could be saying to his mother: "Look at me! Behold your son! This is really me -- crucified, executed, in agony, destroyed by the empire, yet nonviolent, forgiving and compassionate to the end. I want you to really see me, know me and accept me. This is who you are the mother of." Mary knew Jesus through and through, from the womb and childhood to his death, but no one, including her, can really grasp who he is, much less understand his spectacular loving, nonviolence. Here, at the foot of the cross, Jesus tells her to "behold your son." Mary may have been the only one to every really see Jesus. Like Mary, we need to do the same -- to behold the crucified, nonviolent Jesus and fashion our lives after his nonviolent spirit.

"I thirst." (John 19:28)

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is thirsty. When he meets the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob, he asks her for a drink of water. They get talking, he confides in her that he is the Messiah and she runs off and tells the whole town about him. But he never gets a drink! Later in the temple he cries out, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink!" (John 7:37) In Matthew, he says, "I was thirsty and you gave me drink." Here in John, they offer him wine, and he takes it. In other accounts, he refuses the wine, saying he will not drink again until he drinks "the new wine at table in my father's kingdom." By refusing the wine, he feels every pulse of pain.

This line was one of the most important scripture verses for Mother Teresa. She reflected on its meaning for decades, and developed her own spirituality about the God who thirsts for humanity's love and never receives it. Good Friday invites us to hear the thirst of Christ, and to try to quench that thirst in our prayer and loving service of others.

"It is finished." (John 19:30)

The hour has finally arrived, the journey complete, the work done, the mission accomplished. "And bowing his head, he handed over his spirit." Jesus was determined to fulfill his mission as the beloved son of God, the peacemaking Christ. Does it seem like he successfully finished his mission? Wasn't he a total failure? Or did he indeed finish his mission perfectly, as far as the God of peace, love and compassion is concerned?

This sentence invites us to give thanks for Jesus and his mission, and to reflect on how we intend to finish our own missions. How we can join Jesus' mission and spend the rest of our lives fulfilling his work of peace, love and nonviolence, so that we too can say at our deaths, in a spirit of grace and gratitude, "It is finished. We have fulfilled our mission. We have faithfully followed the nonviolent Jesus and done our small part to bring peace and love to humanity." Good Friday invites us to reflect on the mission before us and how we intend to see it to completion.

"Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

Jesus offers himself completely to his beloved God, who announced to him by the Jordan River, "You are my beloved." Jesus lives and dies in intimate relationship with his beloved God. That is the key to his peacemaking life and death -- he is faithful to his core identity and his relationship to his beloved God. This last sentence summons us to be faithful to our true identities as sons and daughters of the God of peace and that relationship with God and one another.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, they are the sons and daughters of the God of peace." "Love your enemies, then you will be sons and daughters of the God who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." Jesus teaches that if we remain faithful to that fundamental identity as sons and daughters of the God of peace and love, we will be true peacemakers, people of universal love like him. From the desert to the cross, he resists the temptation to deny his true identity, to doubt God. He trusts in the God of peace, and in the end, surrenders to God. In doing so, he is perfectly nonviolent. His holy death invites us to focus ourselves on our beloved God, and to surrender ourselves to God.

The loud cry

But there's more. According to Mark, as Jesus dies of suffocation, he uses his last strength to gather all his energy and give one last outburst, "a loud cry." With that, he breathes his last breath. He has no more strength to lift his lungs and take another breath. He dies fully conscious, alert and alive. From Mark 15:22-37, we read:

> At three o'clock, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "Look, he is calling Elijah." One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down." Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

Jesus has always lived a life of total nonviolent resistance. He has done everything he can to awaken people to reality. I think he decided to use the moment of his death as one last gift. He offers his last dying breath as one last act of protest against the world of killing, war and empire. He gathers every last ounce of strength, takes one last deep breath, and instead of dying quietly, he bursts out with a loud cry. After all his teachings, parables, commandments, beatitudes and blessings, he cries out loudly in an appeal beyond silence and words. He cries out to God and to every human heart. It is his last act.

This Good Friday, I invite us to hear the loud cry of the crucified, nonviolent Jesus. Where do we hear it? I hear it in the cry of the poor and oppressed throughout history and throughout the world today; in the victims of all wars, injustices and empires; in the dead of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, from Auschwitz and Dresden to Vietnam and Central America, Iraq and Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. In that loud cry, I hear Jesus begging humanity to wake up, reject the insanity of violence, become nonviolent, and turn with compassion toward others and welcome God's reign of peace.

This Good Friday, as we hear his last words and his loud cry, we let our hearts be broken and disarmed, and surrender to the God of peace all over again.

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John Dear will speak April 9 in Colorado Springs, Colo.; April 10 in Denver; April 11 in Cheyenne, Wyo.; and April 12 in Casper, Wyo. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [1], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [3] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[4]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[5]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[6]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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