

ST BART'S



A Meditation by:

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“Into Your Hands I Commend My Spirit”

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, April 18, 2014
Good Friday, Based on Luke 23:44-49*

*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. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.*

All of us are different beings. We come from different places and backgrounds. We are “wired” differently. Yet we can find points of connection. There are two things all of us have in common: Each of us is a human being, and each of us will experience physical death. Each of us is a human being, I believe created by God and loved by God, and each of us will experience physical death.

Death is not the most popular topic, particularly in our culture that expends great energy and billions of dollars denying death. We don't need to dwell on it or become obsessed by it, but it's possible—maybe even a good thing—to live with the reality that our time here on this earth is limited. We humans are the only beings that live with the knowledge of our death. That knowledge, if we accept it, can make all the difference in how we live.

Jesus, at his moment of dying, cries out, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Those are words from Psalm 31. Listen to a few verses of that psalm:

*In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.*

*Incline your ear to me;
make haste to deliver me.*

*Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,
for you are my crag and my stronghold;
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.*

*Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me,
for you are my tower of strength.*

*Into your hands I commend my spirit,
for you have redeemed me,
O LORD, O God of truth. [Psalm 31:1-5, BCP p. 622]*

Having grown up in a devout Jewish household, Jesus would have known the Psalms and other scriptures. He would have learned them “by heart” as we used to say. Those words became part of him, so much a part of him that even at his moment of dying, he was able to draw on them.

What have we learned “by heart” that has become part of us?

When our dying moment comes, what words will be on our lips?

Jesus added one word, a very important word, to those words he knew so well from Psalm 31: **Father**, into your hands I commend my spirit. Not Lord, not God, but “Father,” “Daddy,” “Dad.” A name signifying a relationship not of distance, but one of closeness, of intimacy, of trust.

Years ago while traveling around Israel, I was sitting beside Daniel, our Israeli guide, when Daniel received a call on his cell phone. He spoke in Hebrew, but I recognized the words “Abba” and “Amma”—Daddy, Mama. I told Daniel I’d not meant to eavesdrop, but the word “Abba” had caught my ear. He smiled and explained, “I was talking to my daughter. She’s six.” To his daughter, Daniel was quite naturally “Abba.”

When our time of dying comes, whom will we call out for?

Into your hands I commend my spirit.

Into your hands. What a comforting image. Hands open, ready to receive. The hands of a father, the hands of a mother, reaching for their beloved child, to clasp that child close to the father’s heart, the mother’s heart, in comfort and safety and love. The hands open, arms outstretched to hug in welcome, to welcome home.

Into your hands I **commend** my spirit. I entrust my spirit to you. I give you my life. I trust you. I place my life in your hands.

In our Episcopal tradition, at the end of the Burial service is the Commendation. We commend the person who has died to God. Every person receives the same commendation, regardless of wealth or status or anything else. The Commendation contains these words: “Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.” [BCP 499]

Into your hands I commend **my spirit**, my life.

According to the American writer and theologian Fred Buechner, “To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.” Those who had plotted, schemed, arrested, beaten, mocked, scourged and crucified Jesus thought they had taken his life. But in the end, Jesus gave up his life—not to the forces of evil, but to his Father, to God.

Even under the most horrible circumstances, when it seems we have no choice, we do have the ultimate choice. We can choose to let go of what others are determined to take from us. We can make that holy by letting go of that for love.

A woman imprisoned and tortured horribly tells her torturers: "You may have complete power over my body, but you cannot make me hate you."

Holocaust survivor Victor Frankel wrote of seeing people lined up to go to the concentration camp ovens. Some, crazy with fear, turned into animals. Others tended to each other, offering some last measure of comfort and human kindness.

Those of us still walking on this earth can learn a lot from someone who dies well. (Dying well does not mean dying easily.) My friend Margaret died three years ago. When she learned her cancer treatment would not cure her but would only continue to decrease her quality of life for the short time she had left, Margaret said, "Enough. Remove this. It is time for me to go." She faced the imminent reality of her death with her eyes open, with her customary grace, gentleness and wry humor. Margaret died with integrity. In her death and in her life, she was the same person.

Just a few days before her death, I visited Margaret. We sat in front of a large window with a view of trees, with light streaming in. I asked, "Margaret, what do you think it will be like?" Margaret said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, how about sending a postcard back?" She said, "OK." I still haven't received that postcard . . .

Our Burial service in The Book of Common Prayer says, "in the midst of life we are in death." I think the inverse is true as well: in the midst of death we are in life. Life and death are intertwined.

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