A Communion Meditation

The point of this meditation is that God delights to see us preparing ourselves to receive Holy Communion. Many ways of preparing oneself to receive Communion have been discovered and practiced by people throughout the history of the Church. We certainly need to experiment for ourselves concerning how we prepare ourselves.

In Communion, we participate in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ for the sins of the world (1 Corinthians 10:16). The Lord promises to be present whenever two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20). In Communion, we celebrate that presence and we remember his death and resurrection on our behalf (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). We stand in continuity with the disciples who broke bread with him both before and after his resurrection.

One method of preparing oneself for Communion is to review the words of Jesus on the cross, because these words, although few, offer much insight into what his death and resurrection really mean. The following meditation on the words of Christ on the cross does not presume to exhaust the meaning of those words; this short meditation is simply a sequence of thoughts from one individual.

Matthew and Mark

The only words that Matthew and Mark record are

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

These words plunge to the greatest depths of Jesus' feelings while he was on the cross. The pain that they express goes far, far beyond the physical pain that he suffered. Although the physical pain was terrible, these words mark an unspeakably horrible moment in which Jesus suffered the loss of his fellowship with the Father. The eternally preexistent Son of God, through whom the world was made, and who had been in fellowship with the Father from all eternity, was cut off from the Father. The reason is clear. Jesus, through his crucifixion, took on the sin of the world. Even though he was innocent, he willingly took on the sin of the entire world and suffered the penalty for our sin. Jesus' own words confirm this; they reflect what transpired on that cross. In the moments that followed, Jesus freely endured the burden of our sin-- the just anger of his Father-- right up to the very point of death. The nature of the moment of death cannot possibly be completely understood; it transcends us. We are left with our feelings only. And we can only wonder at the feelings of God the Father at this moment, and of the Spirit of God; they transcend us.

Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for our sin in the manner that is presented in the Hebrew scriptures. The plan of God the Father and His son, in letting Jesus march to his own sacrificial death, is astounding. This singular, terrible moment was God's plan from eternity. We stagger in attempting to fathom Jesus' feelings as he suffered. The whole picture is foreshadowed in the story of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac. God stopped Abraham just short of the act and provided a ram, which was caught in a thicket, as a substitute for Isaac.

The substitute for us is Jesus himself, the "Lamb of God." Unlike Abraham, God the Father, and His son in selfless obedience, did in fact go through with the sacrifice. We note carefully that it was not the Father Himself who executed the sacrifice. Jesus willingly allowed himself to be executed-- at the hands of the people! It was a stunning exhibition of the plan of God and the obedience of Christ.

Luke

Luke has three sayings.

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

The plan of God the Father, in hiding the full identity of His son until after his resurrection, was perfect. Jesus had lived his life incognito, not fully known as the eternally preexisting Son of God even by his closest disciples until after the resurrection. The reason becomes clear in Jesus' words of forgiveness on the cross. He asks the Father to forgive men and women because they did not know what they were doing, and he knew that his death provides the basis for the forgiveness of sins.

The Lord's full identity was hidden not only from the disciples and everybody else, but it was also hidden even from the devil! When Satan entered Judas, the devil thought that he was killing the Messiah, the great Davidic descendant who would save Israel, and he wished to put Messiah to death. But the devil was deceived by the ultimate trick, and received a big taste of his own medicine, just as he had deceived Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3:13). The tables were turned on him by the Lord's obedience to the plan of God Almighty because the Lord's death provided the basis for the forgiveness of sins, and the devil hates it. God Almighty, and the Lord, used the serpent's own tactic of deception to defeat him. Consequently, God's curse of the devil in the Garden went into full effect (Genesis 3:14-15), but only after the Lord died and was then raised from the dead. This is the stunning significance of Jesus' incognito. The Lord's great sacrifice on the cross has eternal significance, and the devil indeed gets dirt to eat while we taste sweetness. We are reminded of this by the sweetness of the wine in Communion.

The breadth of Jesus' statement on the cross is illustrated by a story that Luke tells in his sequel to the Gospel. We read of the death of Stephen in Acts 7:59-60 when Stephen asks the Lord Jesus not to hold his death against his murderers. One of those who was responsible was named Saul (8:1), whom Jesus subsequently called to be his disciple, the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:1-19). After Jesus' resurrection, when he gave the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, he told his disciples that if they forgive the sins of anyone, those sins are forgiven by God, but if they retain the sins of anyone, those sins are retained by God (John 20:22-23). These words remind us of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:4).

"Truly I say to you today, you shall be with me in paradise."
(Luke 23:43, author's rendering)

This was Jesus' response to one of the two criminals who were being crucified alongside him. That criminal had recognized that Jesus was innocent, and he requested that Jesus remember him when he comes into his kingdom. The criminal most certainly believed that Jesus is the Messiah. So, the Lord assured him with tender words, full of anticipation, that he would be with the Lord in his kingdom. Many translations have the punctuation as "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise." Modern punctuation marks are not found in the oldest Greek sources (Papyrus 75, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus). In our Bible translations (and in the critical editions of the Greek text) editors have added modern punctuation. Some readers balk at the rendering "today you shall be with me in paradise" because Jesus himself was in the tomb for three days after his death. Furthermore, it is common for believers now to imagine that they pass immediately after death into the Lord's presence in heaven. Many pastors and teachers teach this; it is very common, and it contradicts the scriptural teaching about the resurrection of believers. The scripture says that believers and unbelievers will be raised from death for judgment on the last day (Revelation 20:11-15). Believers in all times will enjoy life on a new earth which has been made by God (Revelation 21-22). This is the paradise of which Jesus speaks. The resurrection of the criminal to eternal life (and believers of all times) will happen like a sudden awakening from the deepest sleep, and we will all open our eyes as participants in eternity. (Revelation 20:4-6 seems to indicate that martyrs-- those who have been beheaded-- are a unique group of believers who are raised to life immediately after their death and reign with Christ "a thousand years." John speaks of this as "the first resurrection" in verse 5.)

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

These are the final words of our Lord before his death. How did these words of commitment arise in the one who was suffering immeasurably because of his separation from his Father, as he became sin itself on the cross? The broken fellowship between the eternal Father and His eternally preexisting Son is unfathomable. But Jesus knew that his death would pay the full price for our salvation, and so he could even look ahead to his reunion with the Father. He consequently entrusts his spirit to the Father and remains obedient to his Father to the point of death.

John

John also has three sayings.

"Dear woman, here is your son… Here is your mother." (John 19:26-27)

On the verge of death, Jesus remembers his mother. It seems that Joseph had died, and that Jesus felt responsible for the care of his mother. And so, he assigns the beloved disciple John the task of caring for her. All of Jesus' followers, including John and his mother, were devastated at the sight of his crucifixion. All their expectations were destroyed by the cruel sight of the cross. But then, Jesus graciously breaks through the complete darkness with a simple word of commandment to John as well as his mother. John was to care for her as his own mother, and Jesus' mother was to take John as her own son. John undoubtedly knew enough to obey his Master, and Mary undoubtedly stored those words in her heart very deeply.

Can anyone fathom the depths of Mary's feelings, both after the death of Jesus and after his resurrection? No, even Mary could not fathom them. But they are undoubtedly like the feelings of all believers as we ponder God's choice of us for salvation... we who most certainly do not deserve His kindness. Though we deserve death, we stand in continuity with John himself, whom Jesus declares implicitly in this passage to be his brother. Who else ought to take care of his mother upon his death? It appears that Jesus' biological brothers were still not believing in him at this point, so Jesus chose John to take care of his mother.

"I am thirsty." (John 19:28)

These are the words that Jesus spoke in fulfillment of scripture. David, in a Psalm of distress (Ps. 69), speaks of such cruel treatment on the part of his adversaries. Jesus, at the Last Supper, told his disciples that he would not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes (Luke 22:18). So, he received sour wine on the cross, according to John's Gospel, but he himself is preparing a lavish banquet even now for those who have believed in him. At that banquet, there will be no

sour wine, but only the best wine the world has ever known. Even now, in Holy Communion, when we take the wine that reminds us of the blood of Christ that was shed on our behalf, we sense a good taste.

And so, the bitter death that Jesus himself suffered has resulted in sweetness for us. This is what we are reminded of by the wine in Holy Communion.

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

What was finished? Jesus was the first son of David who could claim that he had completed the work that God gave him to do. David himself didn't do that. Neither did Solomon. Neither did the great king Hezekiah, or the great king Josiah who were best kings of Judah or Israel, even better than David according to the text of 2 Kings. But Josiah was killed by the Pharaoh of Egypt of all people, and he did not usher in the eternal kingdom of God; indeed, the kingdom of Judah was destroyed by Babylon only a few years later! Jesus, however, was different from these other Davidic kings. His kingdom is established because of his sacrificial death. That kingdom remains hidden to some, but the Holy Spirit has indeed been given to us, and the Spirit shows us that the kingdom of God is in fact established.

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