

GOOD FRIDAY - Famous Last Words

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of April 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Famous Last Words and is from John chapter 19 verses 17 to 42.

Please be seated. Famous last words.

Honey, pass me a fork, there's something stuck in the toaster. Or some real ones. Lady Astor, apparently, as she was dying, her final words were, as she suddenly saw lots of people gathered around her bed, Am I dying or is this my birthday?

And apparently Marie Antoinette, on her way to be executed, her final words were, Pardon me, sir, as she accidentally trod on the foot of the person operating the guillotine.

[1 : 12] You probably know of Captain Oates, one of Robert Scott's fellow explorers. I'm just going outside and I may be sometime. And Nostradamus, who some people think has predicted everything that's ever happened, said, Tomorrow I shall not be here.

I presume he was right. And Roosevelt's last words were, I have a terrific headache. And apparently he just dropped down dead.

And I hope it doesn't apply to me because though I've got a terrific headache, I hope to be alive a bit longer. No. Archimedes, in 212 BC, died.

And his final words were, Wait till I finished my problem. Well, they didn't. The Romans killed him after he said those words.

And in a similar vein, Cecil Rhodes, his final words were, So little done. So much to do. In contrast, oh, no, let me, sorry.

[2 : 20] I have got a headache so I'm finding it hard to concentrate. Like Archimedes and Rhodes, plenty of people die with jobs undone. Archimedes presumably left an unfinished problem.

Cecil Rhodes left unfinished work. Schubert left an unfinished symphony. Dickens, an unfinished novel. James Murray left the last part of the Oxford English Dictionary undone.

But in contrast, Jesus' final words were, It is finished. Not a cry of resignation, not just a saying that my life is finished.

He hasn't run out of time. He's saying, not only my life is finished, but my work, my mission, my task, all the work that God has given me is finished, completed, fulfilled.

It's done. There's nothing left to do. Now that wasn't obvious, I think, for the people who walked past the cross on the first Good Friday. Jesus was executed along with two others outside the city wall, but in a public place where people would be walking in inside, probably near one of the gates of ancient Jerusalem.

[3 : 41] We know that the Romans executed there because they wouldn't do it inside, because they wouldn't have death inside, and also because they wanted to make it as public as possible, so that everybody would see, and the crucifixions would be a deterrent for the crowds.

So it would be like having an execution in the middle of the intersection of Springvale and Dandenong roads, or St Kilda Road and Flinders Street, or something like that, where lots of people would pass by.

And I guess for those who walked past and saw two criminals and Jesus in the middle of them being crucified, they would have thought, here is a sad waste of life. Think of all that could have been accomplished.

A man who is 30 years old in the prime of his life, hardly got anything done probably in his life, much more that could be done, if only he'd been a goody rather than a baddy.

But they'd be wrong. Because Jesus' death was the completion of the work that he came to do for us. John's Gospel makes that clear in all sorts of ways.

[4 : 51] Despite the gruelling nature of crucifixion, the Gospels and John included never labour the point of the suffering and pain. They could easily have torn at our heartstrings by telling us about the slashed back from the scourging, how the bleeding would probably make agony for Jesus when he would be on the cross, and how he'd be struggling for breath, the agony of blood running down his face from the crown of thorns, the difficulty of trying to get breath, trying to lever yourself up so your lungs could operate, but all the time the agony of the nails in your wrists and feet.

But no, the hymn writers labour on that all the time, but never in the Gospels. Verse 18 just simply says, they crucified him.

Because it's his death that matters, not the pain and suffering. It's the death of Jesus that counts. John also emphasises the fact that he's really dead.

The soldiers saw that he was dead. They didn't break his legs like they did for the other two criminals to try and hasten the death for them so that they wouldn't be able to lever themselves up to keep breathing.

Not so with Jesus. They saw that he was dead. They pierced his side and out came blood and water. Signs of death. Probably the penetration of the pericardial sack and where there would be fluid, serum and blood that would be slightly separated would come out.

[6 : 27] It showed that he was really dead. And Pilate, we know from other Gospels, checked that he was dead. He was surprised that he was dead so soon. And then John tells us in some detail in the last part of the reading that we heard today of his burial.

He was really dead. The corpse was going cold. Maybe even beginning to smell very quickly in those days. And Jesus' wealthy friends, Joseph and Nicodemus, buried him in a tomb.

There's no place for those people who think that Jesus just fainted or swooned. It was absolutely certain that he died. And that's what matters.

The fact that he died. For if he didn't, his life was a waste of time. There's also ironic truth here.

Jesus is crucified, as was the custom, with a sign above him or underneath his feet saying who he was, where he was from, and what his crime was. And Pilate, the Roman governor or procurator of Judea and Samaria, had written on it, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

[7 : 44] Pilate didn't really believe that, but his words were a rather mocking taunt to the Jews whom he despised. And in effect, he was not only showing contempt for Jesus by writing those words, but he was actually inciting the Jews and laughing at them.

You think this guy's your king? What a pathetic figure he is. How pathetic you are then to have such a king. The Jews, of course, object.

They want him to change the sign. For once in his life, Pilate stands up and says, No, what is written is written. But as John records it, we realise that there is irony there.

There is truth better than Pilate spoke or wrote. Jesus is the king. John's gospels made that clear in several places from the opening chapter onwards.

And here, for the reader who's read through this gospel, we realise that Pilate's words, in the midst of all this evil and cruelty, ring surprisingly true. Jesus is the king.

[8 : 56] And not only that. Words that are written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, probably the custom anyway for all those who are crucified because Greek was the cultural language, Latin rather, the language of the Roman Empire, of course, and Aramaic, the language of the Jewish people.

The Romans had the view that publishing the crime in all languages would mean that everybody would be deterred. Everybody could read it. But it had the added benefit, I guess, for Jesus of proclaiming his kingship, not just to the Jews, but indeed to the world.

And John has made it clear in his gospel that it is for the world that Jesus has come and come to die. The other way that John shows us that Jesus' death was effective and purposeful is to tell us that it was intended by God.

Jesus is not a helpless victim here either of Pilate or of the Jews. The events that have orchestrated the crucifixion are on the one hand evil machinations, but above that, they are God's purposes being fulfilled.

We see that in a couple of ways. When Jesus dies, verse 30 tells us, in a slightly unusual way, then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

[10 : 23] Not just that he died, but that he gave up his spirit. That is that Jesus has chosen to die. Jesus has laid down his own life.

Now that echoes a point that Jesus himself made explicitly back in chapter 10. He says, no one will take my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord.

He lays down his life for the sheep. And so here in his death, as John records it, Jesus is fully in control.

He is offering his life for the world. He is not just a victim of evil Jewish leaders or Romans. But the other way that John tells us very clearly and strikingly that God is in control here is by the repeated references to the fulfillment of Scripture four times in this passage.

Each of the four times, the thing that fulfills Scripture is in itself rather trivial or insignificant. The first time is that they divided Jesus' clothes and cast lots for his seamless tunic.

[11:40] So what? It doesn't really matter what happened to Jesus' clothes. It's the fact that he died that matters and counts for our salvation. Our salvation doesn't depend upon what happened to his clothes.

But John says this fulfills Scripture. Same in verse 28. Jesus, just before he died, was thirsty. And they offer him wine vinegar to drink.

And again John refers that back to the fulfillment of something in the Old Testament. Doesn't matter, really, does it? That he was thirsty or even that he was given vinegar. Doesn't matter for our salvation.

But John picks up another almost peripheral event and links it to fulfillment. The third one is when, in verse 36, he says, no legs of Jesus were broken.

He's already dead. In one sense, it wouldn't matter whether his legs were then broken or not. It's his death that's mattered. But again, John refers that back to the fulfillment of something in the Old Testament.

[12:47] And the final one, in verse 37, is that they will look on the one whom they have pierced. That is, the soldiers and maybe more generally to the Jewish crowds as well.

So what? In one sense, it doesn't matter whether they look on him or not. In another sense, you'd expect it to. People would look on the one that they've pierced when he dies.

But again, John refers that back to the Old Testament and says that it is fulfilling something. Now, none of those four things is crucial in one sense. None of them affect our salvation.

None of them are, in one sense, essential for our salvation. But John is making it clear that even in the little events surrounding the cross, God is fulfilling what he said would happen.

And by implication, the main event, the cross itself, is God fulfilling what he said would happen. So the implication of all those things put together is that God is sovereign here.

[13:51] God is in control of what's going on. And even though the Roman soldiers unknowingly, unwittingly decided that they'd cast lots for a seamless robe, they had no idea what the Old Testament scriptures would say.

They couldn't care less about the Old Testament scriptures. But God is showing that even in those human beings' actions and words, God is fulfilling what the Old Testament expected.

But it's not just that either. Because each of those four things contributes something else to our understanding of what's going on on the first Good Friday. So when the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing and divide up his clothes, they're only doing what any soldier would do.

It was the soldier's perquisite to have the clothes of the person who was being crucified. John refers back to Psalm 22. And the verse is quoted there about dividing garments and casting lots.

But Psalm 22 is the psalm that Jesus himself quotes, as recorded in Matthew and Mark on the cross, when he says, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[15:00] Now what that psalm is on about is in effect pointing towards Jesus in the end as the one who it seems God has abandoned, whose clothes are divided up by others.

But the psalm also makes it clear that the one who is being abandoned and persecuted in the psalm is in the right with God.

And that is what the hint here is. It's not just the fact that they cast lots for clothes, but it's pointing to the whole psalm and saying this one, Jesus on the cross, is like the one in the psalm, in the right with God.

He is righteous. The same thing about the quote that I'm thirsty, Psalm 69, it's talking about being given to drink some wine vinegar. Again in the psalm, the person is under persecution and threat. He's lamenting to God in his prayer about those who are contriving against him. But that one in that psalm, David is also in the right with God. The implication is, so too Jesus.

[16:09] And for John's readers who would perhaps know their Old Testaments better than we do, they would recognise the context of the quote and know that what it's saying about Jesus is, this one is dying righteously.

The third of these four quotes is the one about the bones not being broken. In one sense maybe this is a little bit more important. The reference in the Old Testament to Exodus 12 is about the Passover lamb and the instructions for offering the Passover lamb sacrifice were that no bones ought to be broken in it.

That would make it an acceptable sacrifice. Now again, that quote is referring to all the events of the Passover which are so dominant in other bits of the Gospels because this is Passover week when Jesus dies.

The meal the night before, the Last Supper, was a Passover meal of Jesus with his disciples. It's clear that as Jesus is dying, he's dying as the real Passover sacrifice.

And that little quote about the bones being broken is just a, in one sense, trivial way of pointing again to what Jesus' death is accomplishing. The death of the Passover lamb in Exodus 12 was to bring freedom and liberation for the people of God.

[17:28] for them, freedom from Egypt and they would be led out of Egypt after the first Passover and come into the promised land. That's the model for what Jesus' death is accomplishing.

His death brings freedom not from Egypt but from sin and brings us into an entry point into a heavenly, eternal promised land. So that little quote about the bones not being broken in Jesus is directing the reader's attention to think through exactly what his death means.

It is a sacrifice that enables the followers of God to enter into an eternal promised land and freedom from sin. The fourth one is maybe a little bit more obscure.

It's a quote from the prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament. They will look on the one whom they've pierced. The context of the book of Zechariah was that the Jewish people were rebelling against God and rejecting him and they were refusing to build or rebuild rather the temple.

They pierce or kill the messenger of God and they'll look on the one whom they've pierced. And then Zechariah promises that in God's mercy a fountain of forgiveness and cleansing will come in effect from the one who's being pierced.

[18:51] So that little quote that looks so insignificant here in John is directing us to a very significant context. Rebellious people of God killing God's messenger but finding in God's mercy a fountain of forgiveness flowing.

How appropriate and amazing that that quote is referring to the flow of blood and water from Jesus' side. Because blood and water are the Bible's agents for cleansing.

Water for ritual cleansing and baptism washing and so on. Blood for the cleansing or atoning for sin. John then is saying something more about what Jesus' death is about.

It is about cleansing of sin. It is about a fountain of forgiveness. As the hymn writers have said let the water and the blood which from thy riven side flowed be of sin the double cure cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Or another hymn writer has said there is a fountain opened wide where life and hope begin. For Christ the Lord was crucified to cleanse us from our sin.

[20:14] And that's what the cross is all about. And that's what John the writer of this gospel is directing us to. So Jesus' death then is God's purpose.

It is under God's sovereignty. And all these events though they look evil and sad and misguided and tragic are actually God's purposes being fulfilled for us.

To bring freedom. To bring cleansing. To bring forgiveness. And when Jesus says it is finished he means it.

All those things are now possible because he dies. one of the hardest things I've had to do in my life was to hand in my PhD thesis.

It was almost harder to hand it in than to do it. Three years of work all bound up in this little thing. And the reason why it was so hard was because I knew that there was always more to do.

[21:22] There were already more books or articles to read. More things I could think through to improve my PhD thesis. And being some people think a bit of a perfectionist I was very reluctant to pass this over thinking another day and I could improve that paragraph.

Another week and I could rewrite a few more pages. Another few months and I could improve it even more in different and significant ways. It's the same for writing sermons. I could always

improve them.

Always find more things to say or better ways to say it or understand the passages better. As it was the day after handing my PhD thesis in I was in a Christian book shop and noticed a brand new book on the book of Deuteronomy and I thought no it's too late.

I read the book later on and it wasn't worth reading anyway. Sometimes I think that when I grow up I might become a tram conductor because then I would be able to do a job that I could say at the end of the day it is finished, it is done, my in tray is empty but they don't have tram conductors anymore so I'm a bit stuck here.

I guess you see perfectionists can hardly ever say it's finished, it's done. There's always more, it can always be done better.

[22 : 48] Jesus is the perfect perfectionist and on the cross he said it is finished. Not it is finished because it's the best I can do in the limited time available to me.

Not it is finished because my scholarship for doing this project has run out and I'm broke. The job's done and it's done perfectly, fully and completely.

There's nothing more that can be done to improve it. It is finished and it is perfect. When James Murray died somebody else had to finish the Oxford English Dictionary.

I imagine that when Schubert died somebody else had to finish his unfinished symphony otherwise it would have a very peculiar ending or none. But when Jesus died his work was done totally and fully and that means that you and I don't have to somehow add to it or complete it or put in our contributions worth to make it fully complete and effective.

It's all done for us. There's nothing we can do or have to do for it except receive it by faith. As the prayer book says it is one full perfect and sufficient sacrifice satisfaction and oblation for the sins of the whole world.

[24 : 21] That doesn't leave much space for adding to it. John has recorded these events so that we may believe.

He says that in verse 35 talking about himself he says he who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. his testimony is true and he knows that he tells the truth.

He was there he saw it. He understood what it was about he'd been taught by Jesus and after the resurrection was taught further by him. We can rely on him he says.

So therefore the point of this passage is to ask us the question do we believe? Do we believe not only that Jesus died that's not the point but that he died for you and that his death was effective totally for your salvation and forgiveness?

Do you trust in this crucified king with your life? Does your cleansing for sin come from his death for you and shed blood? Do you believe in a despised and rejected saviour?

[25 : 40] Do you rely on the cross as a finished work of salvation for you? Has the fountain of forgiveness flowed for you?

Lifted up was he to die. It is finished was his cry. And now in heaven exalted high.

Hallelujah what a saviour. Famous last words indeed. It is finished. What will your famous last words be?

Charles Wesley longed that his last words would be. Happy if with my final breath I might but gasp his name.

preach him to all and cry in death behold behold the lamb may they be ours also.

[26 : 47] Thank you.