

“Father, Into Your Hands I Commend My Spirit”

Luke 23:44-49

The final struggle now begins. Jesus is fast tiring and can no longer pull himself up to breathe. That very fight for breath keeps tearing him apart on this torture device which weakens his body until he simply cannot raise himself to take in air. The spikes by now have gradually sawed their way into Jesus’ bones and so ripped his muscles that he can no longer lift his body. The stark sun of this April afternoon hurries the process. It beats at his face, burns his naked body, and draws out the last life-sustaining moisture. The struggle is over. Jesus suffocates, proclaiming with his last breath, “Father into your hands I commend my Spirit”.

Jesus had no doubt prayed these words from Psalm 31 many times. Jesus approached death as he had approached life. He committed everything to God. Jesus had been preparing for his death all his life. He was always committed to God as are we to be always committed to God.

The men drive their sharp knives into the lambs, opening the arteries. Warm blood gushes out. At the first Passover, hyssop had been dipped in this and used to sprinkle the blood on the doorposts. Now priests, their white robes splattered crimson, place the last of the bowls beneath the wound to catch the life of the lamb. This is conveyed from priest to priest. Finally, the last in the row throws it against a now thoroughly bloodied altar base. This last group seems to be wading in blood as cistern water is mixed with it to clean the area before the blood congeals. The air hangs thick with the sickening sweet smell of warm, newly lost life.

The day is now drawing to a close. The soldiers are informed that the bodies must not be allowed to remain on the crosses on the Sabbath.

It may take another day or so for these strong revolutionaries to lose their battle for breath. To hurry the process and to assure no recuperation, a soldier methodically wields a hammer, smashing the leg bones of the two on either side of Jesus, and sending a shiver of sympathetic pain through even the most callous onlooker. When the soldier turns to the central cross, he realizes that this one is no longer a problem. Jesus is dead. There is no need to break his legs, only to run a spear into his side to ensure death's total victory. As the soldier drives the sharp spearhead into his side, wine-red blood and water gush out, flowing down over the sign, "King of the Judeans" and onto the skull-like rock below. Tiny rivulets of blood form and flow toward the rock's side, covering the earth. The soldiers could care less about cleaning it up or washing it away. It simply sinks into the world.

The last of the flayed lambs are taken gently from the crosspieces between the men's shoulders and from the hooks fastened to walls and pillars. Care is taken that not one of the bones is broken, as Moses prescribed. The legs are folded carefully into the body cavity which is then wrapped in its own skin. Carrying the sacrifices, these men are joined by those waiting in the Temple area as they now leave together, dispersing to their homes before the Sabbath begins. There the body of the lamb is carefully washed and prepared for roasting by being rubbed with salt. A spit made of a pomegranate branch is put through it and the limbs are bound into the body. As it roasts, family and close friends begin to gather in the solemnly lighted home. Here they recall the Exodus of the People from captivity, when blood on every doorpost and the eating of the lamb redeemed the People from the terrible night of death. They remember not only the past, but their present bondage to Rome which controls their beloved city and the Holy Place this night.

They wait for an anointed one who will come to remove from their midst all threat of slavery and death as the bread of blessing is broken and passed and they begin to partake of the lamb.

The two fighters for liberation, still struggling for life, are torn away from their crosses and dragged to a prison to await impending death. Jesus hangs alone, drooped over almost as in submission to the world. Yet, even in death, that world seems strangely under his control. One of the men who stayed in the shadows watching this sacrifice of one Man for the People was Joseph, a rich man from the hometown of Samuel, Arimathea. He is the owner of the garden beside which the crucifixions have taken place. Recently he purchased this valuable former stone quarry for his family tomb. The first burial chamber has just been cut into the limestone wall of the quarry which faces Golgotha, of which it was once a part. Being of the upper class and having many an opportunity for business with the procurator, he easily gains permission for a secret meeting with Pilate at which he requests permission to bury Jesus in his family tomb. Permission is quickly granted.

The crowds are now gone. Those on their way home or heading for encampments avoid coming any closer to the dead one for fear of being made unclean. Helped by Nicodemus (who has been watching from the shadows not only this afternoon, but for several years) and the few soldiers left on cleanup detail, Joseph unfastens Jesus from the wood and slowly lowers his body. Lifting him down from the rock, they carry Jesus the 25 yards to the tomb entrance. Tenderly they lay out his body, carefully washing away the blood and cleansing it of the dirt of abuse. Olive oil is mixed with perfume and rubbed on him to prevent the stench of death. Linen bands are brought and he is carefully wrapped.

With one last look at the features that have brought so much life to them, they cover his face with a napkin of linen which is then bound over the head.

Jesus is then passed through the small, square opening of the tomb into the dark chamber. The bench on the right side of the tomb is cut beautifully from the rock with an arched ceiling chiseled in the stone. A lamp burns in the niche above the bench illuminating the bound one below. Joseph spares no expense, ordering that 75 pounds of spice be brought and packed into the tomb chamber to prevent any smell from escaping from the tomb. Joseph gives a royal burial to his King who now sleeps in death. A stone is set in place to block the opening of the tomb. Sabbath, the day God rested at the completion of the first week of the Good Creation, begins.

May the peace of God . . .