

Sober Words, Saving Words: Jesus' Holy Week Teachings

The season of Lent gives us the opportunity to focus again on Jesus' last days before his crucifixion. How did Jesus spend these final days of his ministry? For most of us, certain events come to mind. We see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, kneeling before his disciples to wash their feet, and breaking bread at the last supper. All of these events were significant moments in Jesus' ministry. Yet Jesus' primary activity during these last days remained the same as it had always been. Every day of Holy Week, he taught. (Luke 22:37) When we read Jesus' teachings in these final days, they reveal his profound love for his followers, and for his enemies.

Scripture records that Jesus often taught in parables as the crucifixion drew near. Most of these parables were directed to his enemies: the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and other leaders who were plotting his death. Jesus pleaded for them to repent through stories that illustrated ever more starkly the sin in their hearts and the horror of their fate.

Jesus told them about a vineyard, with wicked tenants that killed the vineyard owner's servants, then finally attacked and killed the owner's very son. "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," he declared to the chief priests who were conspiring to kill him, "and given to a people who will produce its fruit." (Matthew 21:43)

Jesus spoke again about a good king who prepared a wedding feast, sending out his servants to invite many guests. Those invited rejected the king's generous proposal, and instead some even captured and killed the servants. "The king was enraged," Jesus told them. "He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." (Matthew 22: 7)

Jesus' harsh, even shocking words at this time in his ministry in reality were words of profound love from a God who wants no one to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9) As the cross loomed, Jesus never ceased reaching out to those who hated him.

During Holy Week, we also see Jesus' compassion for a different group of people, his disciples. Jesus concerned himself with preparing his followers for the dark days ahead. Their beloved friend, their hope for the future, the One for whom they had left everything behind, soon would be condemned in a sham trial, and hung on a cross to die a tortuous, publicly humiliating death. What could Jesus say that would guard their hearts from despair?

It is here in Jesus' last words to his disciples that we find some of the most beautiful assurances in Scripture.

"Because I live, you also will live," he declared to his disciples, testifying to the resurrection—his own and theirs. (John 14:19)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus told them. "In my Father's house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you." (John 14:1-2)

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you," he reassured them. "I do not give as the world gives." (John 14:27)

"Now is your time of grief," Jesus acknowledged, "but I will see you again, and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." (John 16:22)

By these words of peace, joy, and promise, Jesus in his love sought to carry them through the approaching days when their Light would be extinguished. The Holy Spirit enabled them to remember, reflect, understand, and draw sustaining hope from Jesus' words. These promises to his disciples did indeed come true.

For his enemies, Jesus wielded a powerful sword of words intended to shock and pierce. Yet they refused the Holy Spirit's work to shatter their unbelieving hatred, and so too were fulfilled Jesus' words of condemnation for those who rejected him.

These two groups appear to have nothing in common, either in the words Jesus spoke to them in the shadow of the cross, or in their ultimate destinies.

Yet they are one and the same in that both drove Jesus to the cross. The sins of both his followers and his enemies could only be paid through that agonizing death and total separation from God the Father. It is Jesus' love for both that brought him to earth, and sent him to his death. Those enemies who refused to repent never reaped the benefit of Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus' followers, however, embraced their Savior by the Holy Spirit and have taken their places in the rooms that Jesus assured them he would prepare.

We also acknowledge that our sins sent our beloved Light to the darkness Hell. Like disciples past, we too rejoice in our forgiveness. We anticipate the moment when we will rise to experience ourselves the fulfillment of everything promised in those last days by our Savior, our Living Word.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, as I reflect on your words of teaching this Lent, let my ears be opened to your sober warning about the seriousness of sin, and my heart be gladdened by your assurances of complete forgiveness and eternal life. Deepen my understanding of your profound love for me and for all people. Guide me as I carry your words of life to others. Amen.

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