

## HANDS

***“Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit. Luke 23:46*** The last word.

While there is always supposed to be something significant about a person’s last words (and indeed, we have spent several weeks together meditating on these sacred sayings of our Savior), somehow the final word of Jesus has always struck me as something like a BEDTIME PRAYER.

Perhaps that is because of the quiet confidence in which it was offered, after the terrible agony that had gone on before, perhaps because it is the last thing Jesus said before ‘falling asleep’ for the final and decisive time’ or perhaps it just sounds to me so very much like the bedtime prayer with which many of us grew up:

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” has about it precisely the aura of “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”

A fine little prayer; a fitting way to close one’s eyes for peaceful rest. At least it always seemed so, until that terrifying day when you suddenly realized what you were praying as the little rhyme went on:

“If I should die before I wake...” “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.”

If I should die?! I’m not sure I was really planning on that or that I really want to contemplate the possibility, even now.

In one family I know, some nice grandmotherly lady had made a framed sampler for the children’s bedroom of that bedtime prayer, and its wording had been modified significantly: “Guide me safely through the night; wake me with the morning light.”

That is how they prayed it then – how all of us would prefer to pray it – kind of a “laundered” version that does not bother to frighten little ones (or their parents).

With the possibility of “If I should die before I wake” although perhaps wrongly so. For even for Jesus, the eternal Son of God, at this moment that... “If I should die ...” was more than just a possibility, but the reality of the situation. He WOULD die...right now. This was IT!

“Father, into YOUR hands,” he prays. For by now his own hands were helpless, as ours someday will be...even his, those hands that he used with such might and mercy to heal the sick; to touch the blind, the deaf, the leper in their misery; to break the bread and bless the fish; to grasp and raise to life again the dying, and the dead...those strong and saving hands were helpless now, by this late hour probably even numb beyond the pain of tearing nails.

And other hands were helpless too, as they always prove to be when death draws near...those hands, that is, that had not already been turned against him...even those raised to offer drink could do little more than comfort for the moment what was inevitable. Most friendly hands would be helpless as his own: wringing clasped to breast, folded perhaps “If I should DIE before I wake.” “Father, into YOUR hands I commit my spirit.”

For even in the face of death, those hands are strong to save. At the beginning, the Lord God used those hands to form man from the dust of the ground – and woman from his rib “handcrafted,” as a thoughtful Christian once put it...and into that dead sleep he breathed that breath of life.

“Is the arm of the Lord shortened that I cannot save?” God asked that question when once again he worked to effect life in the midst of dying, as at Passover and the Exodus.

“You open your hand,” the psalmist prayed, “and satisfy the desire of every living thing,” and life is promised and renewed in that ever-open hand.

And now... “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep” ...  
“Into YOUR hands I commit my spirit.”

“And the curtain of the temple was torn in two,” St Luke tells us, as Jesus prays his bedtime prayer.

Normally at bedtime (at least as I remember it from my own childhood the curtains are closed when the bedtime prayers are said. The world is shut out now as darkness deepens and sleep descends. It is not until morning that the curtains shall be parted again to let in the full dawn of a new day. Unless... If I should die before I wake,” for that would be the final drawing of the curtain, the final shutting out of what has been, of all that is to be seen and heard and done and savored and rejoiced in, of all that IS.

But even as Jesus offers his bedtime prayer – the FINAL bedtime prayer before HIS final sleep – the situation is reversed! For even “while the sun’s light failed,” we read, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two.”

Not merely drawn aside and opened, to be closed again on another day, but “torn in two” – rendered useless, obsolete! For in THIS death – the dying of the Son of God – all death is done forever! The curtain will be drawn no more – the curtain CAN be drawn no more – for behold, the hands of God have done their mighty saving work in him, for us!! And in the Father’s hands we too are safe.

“Father, into YOUR hands I commit my spirit.” He who had called on the Father to forgive ... can now call confidently to be received.

He who had offered the dying thief Paradise ... would enter it himself as the living Lord. He who called ... Behold your son - Behold your mother - and provided a home for his mother with his beloved disciple would now go home himself, to his true and real home.

He who had felt himself forsaken by his God would now, like the prodigal son of his own parable, find the Father's hand open wide to receive and welcome him back.

He who said, "I thirst" would reign forever where "they shall hunger and thirst no more." He who had said "It is finished," would find for himself (and for us) life that has NO ending.

He who had opened HIS hands to the nails as he had opened them in love to all the needs and ills of God's people always – would now find other hands, "the everlasting arms," as strong to save.

And so, in the gathering darkness of this Good Friday, we prepare to leave, eventually to join our Lord in sleep. What will you pray when you go to bed tonight?

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep" and then what? Even when the next line is, "If I should die before I wake" and some-day, sooner or later, of course, we shall, even so, we may close our eyes as our Savior did, with a simple bedtime prayer, assured even now of Easter, for the rending of the curtain signals even now the rending of the tomb.

We who have watched and followed these 6 weeks, believing, will follow farther still, confident that in Christ's victory OUR last words too may be a simple bedtime prayer.

"Father, into YOUR hands I commit MY spirit."