
Dying is Hard Work

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Good Friday

"My kingdom is not from this world."
Jesus to Pilate, in The Gospel of John, 18:36

"My kingdom," said Jesus, "is not from this world." This "world."

This "world" has a hard time calling this day "Good." Today, well-intentioned reporters and newscasters note that Christians commemorate Good Friday as the day when Jesus was crucified and died. Well, that's a start. But it says little about why we call this Friday "Good."

The "world" cannot call this Friday good; the "world" is unable to call this Friday good. When I say the "world," I mean that world around us which is unable to hear the spirit of Jesus. I mean "the world," in the way Jesus meant it when he said to his disciples, "you do not belong to the world" (John 15:19), and "the world does not know the Father" (John 17:25), and "in the world, you will have tribulation, but be of good courage, for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

For, the "world" is unable to accept death. Wherever we look in this world, we see attempts to deny death. We read about this latest health plan, or this new elixir, or diet plan or workout plan, which will extend our youth. We get excited about the temptation. Wouldn't it be great to live forever? We dye the gray out of our hair and feel younger!

Some of the most holy moments of our lives occur when we are sitting with someone who is about to die. I was there. I have sat in somber hospital rooms, and quiet hospice rooms, even in people's homes, with families who are waiting for their loved one to die. During these times, everyone knows death is imminent; but no one can slow down, or speed up, the process. Time, in fact, seems to stand still.

Were you there? These are holy moments. I remember, when I was younger, my own grandmother dying. Of course, I had known her throughout my childhood. Almost every week, it seemed, we drove up from the country and had supper in her fine home. As we would leave her house, all piled into the family station wagon, we would look at her in the

front door. She would always, always, be standing there silently in the door, with her hand raised, giving us a silent blessing as we left. We loved that blessing, that precious wave good-bye. God bless.

Years later, she was dying; and I sat on the bed with her, I asked her to give me a blessing again. And she did. Just like she had always done from the front door. This time, she was not standing up, and her body had become withdrawn and fragile; but she raised her hand and blessed me. It was one of the most powerful blessings I have ever received, from a dying and holy woman. When a dying person blesses you, you are truly blessed.

Many of us have sat with people about to die. Were you there? Yes, some of those moments are unexpected and truly tragic. An accident. A wicked disease. Some horror takes away our loved one at too young an age, long before we ever thought death would intrude. Some of the moments, however, are more gentle. An old man lives a long and good life, and the time simply arrives; he slips away.

No matter how our minds interpret the event—unexpected or expected—the moments before death are emotionally draining. Even when our minds, our intellects, accept the reality of death, its moment makes our hearts grieve, its moment saddens our souls.

All this is why we gather on Good Friday. Today is not a day to remember something about Jesus; today is a day to remember something about ourselves. Obviously, we do remember Jesus today; we hear the long gospel, a horrible narrative about his last hours. We imagine him carrying a cross, then on the cross, then dying. We see some vague image in our prayers. We are there.

But what we really do, today, is remember something about ourselves. Because there are many days in our lives that feel more like Good Friday than Easter. Maybe if we had our way, we would choose the naïve and innocent joy of Easter every day. Again, the "world," the "world," sure wants to make every day feel like naïve Easter joy!

But there are many days that we do not feel like waking up for Easter morning. On some mornings, the night has been too long. Maybe there is too much sadness in our lives. Maybe someone we love has died.

Maybe someone we love has been horribly inconsiderate to us, maybe even mean to us, has maybe even betrayed us. Maybe that someone who was so mean was the person we thought we could trust the most. Maybe a friend has turned out to be an enemy. Jesus knew these events.

Maybe that someone who has been so incomprehensible, or so unconscionable, seems to be God, God himself—or God herself, whatever gender we are imagining right now.

Today is a day to remember those events. The death that we experience today is not simply the death of Jesus long ago. It is the death of those we know, and have known, today. To walk the way of Jesus today is to follow Jesus to the cross with our own lives, with our own memories, and with our own deaths. It is only because of today that we can truly know new life. Saint Paul understood; in his Epistle to the Romans he said, "If we have died with

Christ, we believe that we will also live with him" (Romans 6:8).

Ultimately, Good Friday is about accepting death. And the "world" around us would rather not accept the reality of death. It is too hard. Dying is hard work.

Today, I remember the words of someone who died only recently. I was not there, at the bedside. It was a daughter and her mother who were there, alone in the hospice care room. For almost two months, the daughter had been traveling back and forth to the hospital room, sometimes on good days ""when her mother was quite lively and even enjoyed a gin and tonic. But, more and more, there were bad days, when her mother found it more and more difficult to breathe.

In fact, the mother had lung disease, and even the slightest limp across the room left her exhausted for an hour. Fortunately, the mother's mental capacity remained quite strong. She could think, and she knew perfectly well she was dying.

On the last day of her life, only the daughter and her mother were in the room. In fact, the mother had asked the nurses to leave. Together, the daughter and mother spent those holy moments. Woman, behold your daughter; daughter, behold your mother. Together.

"It's okay," said the daughter. "You're doing a great job," said the daughter. And the mother looked up and said, "Dying is hard work." To which the daughter replied, "Yes, and you are doing a great job."

The mother was right. "Dying is hard work." In the next hour, she had died.

We do not believe in resurrection if we do not also believe in death. Dying is hard work. Dying is good, hard, work. We do not believe in Jesus, if we do not believe also in Good Friday. Good Friday is good, hard, work.

Were you there? Were you there, when they crucified my Lord? When they laid him in the tomb? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Dying is good, hard, work.

AMEN.

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