

STANLEY HAUERWAS

MEDITATIONS *on the* SEVEN LAST WORDS

Cross-Shattered Christ



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Meditations on the Seven
Last Words

Stanley
Hauerwas



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Foreword

A short book usually does not need a foreword, but when you have as many people to thank as I have, a foreword is demanded. First and foremost I am indebted to the Reverend Andrew Mead, rector of Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, for inviting me to participate in their three-hour Good Friday Service. God knows what possessed Reverend Mead to invite one like me for such a high honor, but I am extremely grateful to him and all those at Saint Thomas for making possible my participation in their Easter observance. I can report that mostly the congregation stayed the whole three hours.

FOREWORD

Paula Gilbert read these meditations and made some extremely useful suggestions. Indeed her influence goes well beyond her explicit recommendations. What she might regard as only throw-away lines have found their way into these reflections. David Aers, Greg Jones, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Samuel Wells made many useful suggestions about earlier drafts. I owe a particular debt to my colleague Professor Ellen Davis for her close reading of these meditations. Ellen made crucial suggestions about how the text should be rewritten for delivery. To the extent these meditations could be heard (and I was not able to follow all her suggestions) is due to Ellen's good influence.

I owe a particular debt to Rodney Clapp not only for publishing these meditations but for his wonderful suggestions about content and style. Rodney has been after me to write "a small book" and this is it. I have no idea if such a book makes financial sense, but then Rodney and his colleagues at Brazos Press (and Baker) do their work because they love God and God's church. I hope this book may be of some use for that project.

The title of this book is taken from John F. Deane's poem "Mercy" that appears in his book *Manhandling the Deity*. The first two stanzas of the poem read:

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Unholy we sang this morning, and prayed
as if we were not broken; crooked
the Christ-figure hung, splayed
on bloodied beams above us;
devious God, dweller in shadows,
mercy on us;
immortal, cross-shattered Christ—
your gentling grace down upon us.

Readers of this book who are familiar with some of my past work may find a different "Hauerwas" here. There is no humor in these meditations. Though I think there is a deep connection between humor (at least humor that is not cruel) and humility, given the subject of these meditations I simply did not see how humor could be used. Nor do I engage in polemics other than to try to expose our presumptive pride. So these meditations are different, but I hope readers will find here the animating center that I hope has informed the way I have tried to do theology.

I have dedicated this book to Professor Peter Ochs. It may seem very strange to some that a book "so Christian" could be dedicated to a Jew. I told Peter I wanted to dedicate the book to him, but I wanted him to read

these meditations first because, given their content, he might find such a dedication inappropriate and possibly even an embarrassment. Peter is a good friend and I knew he would tell me the truth. He responded with this:

These seven words (dibberot) show how much you have been brought up not only to the Son's service, but also to Israel's—to His Flesh in both senses. May His resurrection shine in you as much as the unrelenting facticity of his death, which, I see, drives you past the human self-centeredness that envelops all of us in modernity, much of the Church and the Synagogue too. But of course we see the Light in you too, the laughing joy that is as much fully God fully human as the other, is it not?

"Deep calls to deep" (Ps 42:7). To share with me and with the people of Israel the intimacy of Christianity's most intimate moment is not an embarrassment—except as much as any love is embarrassment. (As Rosenzweig writes, the call, "love me," embarrasses because it leads me to realize and to confess that, before this love, I was a sinner.) And this, as I understand it, is not a one-way sharing. We are loved and love. We were sinners and yet loved.

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Such a response means I need to give no reason why this book is dedicated to Peter Ochs, who graciously claims me as a friend.

Introduction

Mystery" is not a word I often use even though I am a theologian. Indeed, I avoid the word "mystery" because I am a theologian. To say that what Christians believe is mysterious invites the assumption that what we believe is not believable. In short, "mystery" suggests that what we believe defies reason and common sense. What we believe does defy reason and common sense; but yet I believe what Christians believe is the most reasonable and commonsense account we can have of the way things are.

So when I use the word "mystery" in these meditations to describe the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation I hope to signal to the reader that reflections

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on the seven words of Jesus on the cross should test our deepest theological convictions. "Mystery" does not name a puzzle that cannot be solved. Rather, "mystery" names that which we know, but the more we know, the more we are forced to rethink everything we think we know. So it is my hope that these meditations respect the mystery—a mystery apparent in these words of Jesus from the cross—our faith in God requires.

Put differently, I have tried to approach these seven words in a manner that refuses to offer any explanations (particularly psychological explanations) for what Jesus says to us from the cross. It is my conviction that explanations, that is, the attempt to make Jesus conform to our understanding of things, cannot help but domesticate and tame the wildness of the God we worship as Christians. Accordingly, I found the writing of these meditations hard and difficult. I hope that those who read them will find reading them hard and difficult. I hope that the hardness and difficulty is not due to my inability to express myself clearly (though I have no doubt that I have often been less than clear) but instead comes from how painful it is for us to acknowledge the reality of the Father's sacrifice of the Son on the cross.

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These meditations are unapologetically theological. I am, after all, a theologian. But I hope the reader will also discover that the theological character of these meditations does not mean they are without existential "bite." I think nothing is more destructive for our ability to confess that the crucified Jesus is Lord than the sentimentality that grips so much that passes for Christianity in our day. Sentimentality is the attempt to make the gospel conform to our needs, to make Jesus Christ our "personal" savior, to make the suffering of Christ on the cross but an instant of general unavoidable suffering. I should like to think the relentless theological character of these meditations helps us avoid our sinful temptation to make Jesus's words from the cross to be all about us.

By calling attention to the theological character of these meditations, I do not mean to suggest that my reflections of Jesus's words from the cross are "smarter" or more "intellectual" than other interpretations of his words. Just the opposite is the case. I have worked very hard to avoid making my theological reading of the seven words a substitute for the words themselves. Theology is a servant discipline in the church that, like all such disciplines, can be used by those called to practice the discipline to acquire power over those the servant is meant to serve. As a

result, what the theologian has to say about the scripture becomes more important than the scripture itself.

Theology is the delicate art necessary for the Christian community to keep its story straight. That story consists of beliefs and behavior that are actions required by the content of the story. The work of theology is, therefore, never finished. The work of theology can never be finished not only because we live in a world of change but, more important, because the story we tell resists any premature closure. That story, the seven words of Jesus from the cross, forces us to acknowledge that the past is not the past until it has been redeemed, the present cannot be confidently known except in the light of such a redemption, and the future exists only in the hope made possible by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. In short, at least one of the tasks of theology, a task I have tried to perform in these meditations on the seven words, is to provide a timeful reading of the scripture for our time.

In these meditations, however, I try to do no more than to elicit the characteristics of our time, a time often described as "modern." I did not want these reflections to be accepted or dismissed because of my understanding of what it means for us to be "modern." However, I cannot deny that these meditations were written with a certain

understanding of the difficulty facing the discourse of theology in our day. In his book *Anglican Identities*, a book I read only after I had written these meditations, Rowan Williams observes that the question before theology in our day is "how a language of faith rooted in experiences and expressions of 'extremity' can be rendered in a bourgeois environment without self-serving drama." That, I believe, is exactly the challenge before anyone who attempts to reflect on Jesus's words from the cross. I cannot pretend I have been successful, but that is how I understood the challenge.

Commenting on the work of Archbishop Michael Ramsey, in *Anglican Identities* Williams observes that we must be on the watch constantly for the ideological bondage that threatens to take over a church-based or church-focused theology. I, of course, represent such a theology, and it would be foolish to deny that theological emphasis is well represented in these meditations. Williams suggests the only way to avoid such bondage is to remember that while the church may be perfectly the church at the Eucharist, its life is not exhausted by the Eucharist:

there is a life that is always struggling to realize outside the "assembly" what the assembly shows forth. In that

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context, theology requires the naming of “humiliation” in order to recognize the prophetic import of what it does in worship, especially when even worship in its presentation or structure at any one time may speak of injustices or betrayals of the gospel (as when the ordained ministry speaks of one or another kind of social exclusion, when ceremonial speaks of anxiety or servility, when language evokes alienating or oppressive images).

It is my hope that these meditations help us name the kind of “humiliation” that is at the heart of the Christian worship of God. I believe with all my heart that the constant temptation to betray the gospel, a temptation amply displayed by the history of the church, cannot be resisted in our day by Christians trying to imitate the false humility of tolerance. Rather, the only resource for Christians to resist the ideological distortions of our faith—distortions all the more tempting because to be “self-servingly dramatic” seems a better alternative than to be boring—is our faith in the God to whom Christ prays on the cross.

That God, the God who prays the Psalms, is the God, as Denys Turner puts it, who is “beyond our comprehension not because we cannot say anything about God, but because we are compelled to say too much.” It is not as if we are short of things to say about God. But rather, we

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discover, a discovery nowhere more apparent than Jesus's words on the cross, that anything we have to say about God does not do God justice. The darkness of God, a darkness nowhere more apparent than in the cross of Christ, is the excess of light. It is not that "God is too indeterminate to be known, God is unknowable because too comprehensively determinate, too *actual*. It is in that excess of actuality that the divine unknowability consists." It is only because God is most determinatively revealed in "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" that Christians are forbidden from ever assuming they possess rather than are possessed by the God they worship.

The above does not "explain" my meditations on the seven last words of Jesus. At most I hope this introduction may help some understand why the passage I quote at length from von Balthasar's *Mysterium Paschale* in the meditation on the first word is so important for my exposition of the other six words. Indeed I am not sure I could have written these meditations, limited as they may be, without von Balthasar's extraordinary book. (I have drawn on a number of sources in writing these meditations, but I did not want to distract the reader with footnotes. Instead, I have appended a bibliography at the end of the book that credits the sources I have used.)

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I confessed above that I found writing these meditations hard and difficult. I am not even sure what I have done are properly called meditations. They clearly are not sermons. Nor are they theology proper, but it is not clear if I have ever written "theology proper." But whatever these are, I hope those reading this book will discover, as I was forced to discover, how extraordinary it is that our lives have been redeemed, literally made possible, by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



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one

The First Word

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

LUKE 23:34

Recall holding a just-born infant, or think of an occasion when you cradled a sick and soon-to-die grandparent or elderly friend. We are drawn to embrace those we love, but they can be so precious, fragile, and beautiful that we fear to take hold of them. These cross-shaped words of Jesus, words uttered in agony, put us in a similar position. We are at once drawn to these words,

but we fear taking them in our hands, realizing that we cannot comprehend their power.

To comprehend these words we rightly fear would threaten all we hold dear, that is, the everyday. Everyday death always threatens the everyday, but we depend on our death-denying routines to return life to normality. But this death, and these death-determined words, are not ordinary. This is the death of the Son of God, a death that encompasses death, challenging our assumption that we have or can "come to terms with death" on our own terms. To comprehend this death, to be faced with these words, means life can never return to normal.

This first word, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," seems to offer us comfort. Yet in *Mysterium Paschale* Hans von Balthasar reminds us that this first word from the cross was made the "first word" by virtue of a questionable attempt to harmonize the Gospels. In fact, von Balthasar argues that the first of the seven last words should be the only word we have from the cross in the books of Matthew and Mark, that is, the cry of abandonment.

However, to begin with "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" asks too much of us. What are we to make of such a cry if this

is the Son of God? We cannot suppress the thought: "If you are the Son of God, should you be saying this? If you are God, if you are the Second Person of the Trinity, how can you be abandoned?" This is clearly a God with a problem. There is ample precedence in the Psalms for expressions of being abandoned by God, but we think the Psalms express our despair, our feeling of abandonment, not God's abandonment. We assume, therefore, it is not seemly for God to pray the Psalms. Confronted by these words from the cross, we find it almost impossible for us to resist trying to protect God from being God. Accordingly, we seek some way to explain how or why these words of abandonment could be uttered by Jesus.

Von Balthasar must be wrong. Beginning with Jesus's request that those that crucify him be forgiven—which we try to remember may also include us—seems to offer the kind of explanation we need to save Jesus from the absurdity of being abandoned. These explanations are often called atonement theories. Such theories try to help us understand why Jesus, the son of God, had to die. We think it is really very simple: Jesus had to die because we needed and need to be forgiven. But, ironically, such a focus shifts attention from Jesus to us. This is a fatal turn, I fear, because as soon as we begin to think this is all

about us, about our need for forgiveness, bathos drapes the cross, hiding from us the reality that here we first and foremost see God.

Moreover, as soon as these words from the cross are bent to serve our needs, to give us a god we believe we need, it is almost impossible to resist entertaining ourselves with speculative readings of Jesus's words from the cross. For example we think what a wonderful savior we have in Jesus, who, even in his agony, kindly offers us forgiveness. Of course we are not all that sure what we have done that requires such forgiveness, but we are willing to try to think up something. Ironically, by trying to understand what it means for us to need forgiveness, too often our attention becomes focused on something called the "human condition" rather than the cross and the God who hangs there.

We can even begin to consider whether we need forgiveness when we did not know what we were doing. It seems Jesus does not understand that we, that is, we who assume modern accounts of responsibility, need to be forgiven only when we know what we have done. However, we give Jesus the benefit of doubt by acknowledging we often do things we should not have done and we may have had some vague sense that we should not

have done them. So we probably do need forgiving for what we have done when we may have had some sense we should not have done what we did.

Our narcissism even tempts us to try to understand Jesus's death by analogy with other deaths. Deaths imposed by unjust powers. Deaths resulting from prophetic stands. Deaths that seem meaningless at the time but are made significant by later developments. Deaths that provide some hope against the hopelessness that our own deaths seem to make unavoidable. But Jesus's death is not that of a martyr. These "last words" from the cross are not just another example of truth spoken because nothing is left to lose. By allowing himself to be handed over, Jesus in his dying is not trying to give meaning and purpose to death. As Bonhoeffer observed, Jesus's death and resurrection is not the solution to the problem of death. Rather this is the death of the Son of God.

It is also a stark reminder that these words are not first and foremost about us, about our petty sinfulness. It is the Second Person of the Trinity who asks, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." The Son intimately addresses the Father. We look away, embarrassed by a love so publicly displayed. According to Herbert McCabe,

these words, "Father, forgive," are nothing less than the interior life of the Triune God made visible to the eyes of faith. The Son asks the Father to forgive, a forgiveness unimaginable if this is all about us and our struggle to comprehend the meaning of our lives in the face of death. By this deed, by this word, Jesus rules out all speculative theories that seek to subject these words and this death to our understanding about what is required for the reconciliation of the world. In von Balthasar's words:

Over against such free-wheeling speculation in empty space it should not only be remembered that God is in his (ever free!) sovereignty the absolute ground and meaning of his own action, so that only foolishness can cause us to neglect his actual deeds, in favor of scouting round for other possibilities of acting. But, more than this, we must state positively that to be in solidarity with the lost is something greater than just dying for them in an externally representative manner. It is more than so announcing the Word of God that this proclamation, through the opposition it arouses among sinners, happens to lead to a violent death . . . for the redeeming act consists in a wholly unique bearing of the total sin of the world by the Father's wholly unique Son, whose Godmanhood is alone capable of such an office.

Is it any wonder we find Good Friday so shattering? On this day and with these words, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," all our presumptions about God and the salvation wrought by God are rendered presumptuous. Moreover, that is how we discover that what happens on the cross really is about us, but the "what" that is about us challenges our presumptions about what kind of salvation we need. Through the cross of Christ we are drawn into the mystery of the Trinity. This is God's work on our behalf. We are made members of a kingdom governed by a politics of forgiveness and redemption. The world is offered an alternative unimaginable by our sin-determined fantasies.

Such a politics is not constituted by vague longings for distant ideals but rather by flesh and blood. Flesh and blood as real as Christian de Cherge, the Trappist prior of the Tibhirine monastery in Algeria. Christian and his fellow monks knew their refusal to leave Algeria after the rise of Islamic radicals in 1993 might result in their deaths. Anticipating his death—he was beheaded in 1996 by Muslim radicals—Christian left a testament with his family to be opened on his death. In that testament he asks that those who love him pray that he was worthy of such a sacrifice. He expresses the fear that his death

will be used to accuse in general these people, these Islamic people, whom he has come to love. He ends his testament observing:

Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all those who dismissed me as naive or idealistic: "Let him tell us what he thinks now." But such people should know that my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able—if God pleases—to see the children of Islam as He sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.

I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of, all odds. In this Thank You—which says everything about my life—I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, of my sisters and brothers—thank you a thousandfold.

And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too I wish this thank-you, this "A-Dieu," whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen! Insha Allah!

THE FIRST WORD

Christian de Cherge is a martyr made possible by Christ's death. His life is a witness that allows us to glimpse what it means to be drawn into the life of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the life nailed to the cross. To so be made part of God's love strips us of all our presumed certainties, making possible lives like that of Christian de Cherge, that is, lives lived in the confidence that Jesus, the only Son of God, alone has the right to ask the Father to forgive people like us who would kill rather than face death. That is why we are rightly drawn to the cross, why we rightly remember Jesus's words, in the hope that we might be for the world the forgiveness made ours through the cross of Christ.



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