

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

Sunday, April 1, 2012

Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings:

THE PSALMIST PRAYS WITH CONFIDENCE TO GOD Psalm 31:1-5

Leader: In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.

People: Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

Leader: You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

People: take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

Leader: Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, my faithful God.

New Testament Readings: John 19:30 and Luke 23:44-47

Sermon Title: "The Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross; "Father, Into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit."

Sermon Text: Luke 23: 46: Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,

If I shall die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I wonder for how many of you this was the first prayer that you learned to pray as you said your evening prayers. If this was not your prayer, it certainly has been one for many children as it has come as a classic children's prayer out of the 18th century in this country. That particular version was printed in the New England Primer.

Since I did not grow up in this country, I was not familiar with the New England Primer and this prayer in the same way that many of you, and your parents who may have taught you to pray this prayer, may have been.

As I was growing up in Britain I was more familiar with the opening stanza of a children's hymn of Charles Wesley that many children there, including myself, were taught to pray at night:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee.

I share these two prayers that have been used by many children and adults as prayers before they go to sleep as a way of inviting all of us to think about the prayers that we were taught to pray as children before we want to sleep, or even what prayers we still pray today before we go to sleep. In our Prayer of Thanksgiving at the Lord's Table we will also have an opportunity to think about those prayers that we frequently pray as we give thanks or say the blessing before our meals.

The reason I wanted to invite us this morning to think about the prayers we pray before going to sleep is because of the suggestion that has been made when we think about what according to Luke were the final words of Jesus from the

cross, “Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.” In inviting us to read together the opening words of Psalm 31 this morning I may well have caused you to see where Jesus probably got these last words that he spoke from the cross before he died. Like Psalm 22 which we mentioned two weeks ago as a possible prayer that Jesus may have been praying on the cross, Psalm 31 is probably not one of the most familiar of the psalms for most of us. William Barclay in his commentary on Luke’s account of the death of Jesus though, reminds us that the words from that psalm, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” were the prayer every Jewish mother taught her child to say last thing at night.” (*The Gospel of Luke, The Daily Study Bible Series, Revised Edition. Westminster Press, 1975, page 288*)

In his prayer from the cross we see that Jesus makes this familiar prayer that his mother, Mary, probably taught him to pray there in their home in Nazareth, very personal as he adds the word, “Father.”

Mothers for centuries had taught their children to pray at night, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” as a way of reminding them that they could face the uncertainty of the darkness of the night with the confidence and trust in God that the psalmist reflects in this psalm.

As Jesus makes this prayer even more personal as his last words from the cross before he died he was showing the glory of God that enabled him to face even the darkness of death with confidence and trust in the God whom he had invited people to come to know and to love as Father. In this prayer before he dies he is not simply reminding us of how we can pray with him as he had for many years each night, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” He also is inviting us as we face all of the darkness and uncertainty of death to be able to pray with him, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Today he invites us again to come to this table to remember him and the love that God has shown for us and for all the world in him. As we remember the way

in which he shared this meal with his disciples just before his death on the cross we recognize that we cannot remember him without also remembering how he was willing to suffer and die to show us how much God loves us. As we eat of this bread of which he said, “This is my body broken for you,” we remember how his physical body was broken in pain and suffering for us on the cross. As we drink of this cup of which he said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,” we remember how his life’s blood was poured out in love for us as he died on that cross. Our anthem has reminded us of that wondrous love that God has shown for us in Jesus who was willing to bear the heavy cross for us. As Isaac Watts reflected on that wondrous love he came to recognize that as we eat of this bread and drink of this cup at his invitation so we have that assurance that our sins and all that might stand between us and our great Creator God have been forgiven so that in life and in death we can pray with the same confidence that Jesus knew as he prayed his last words on the cross before he died and said, “Father, into your hands a commit my spirit.” Let us claim again the assurance that comes to us to be able to pray these words ourselves in life and in death because of all that God has done for us in love in Jesus Christ. Let us do this as we join together in singing the hymn of Isaac Watts.

78 Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed

MARTYRDOM CM

Isaac Watts, 1707

Hugh Wilson, c. 1800
Adapt. and harm. Robert Smith, 1825

1. A - las! And did my Sav - ior bleed, And did my Sov - ereign die!
 2. Was it for sins that I have done He suf - fered on the tree?
 3. Well might the sun in dark - ness hide, And shut its glo - ries in,
 4. But drops of grief can ne'er re - pay The debt of love I owe;

Would He de - vote that sa - cred head For sin - ners such as I!
 A - maz - ing pit - y! Grace un - known! And love be - yond de - gree!
 When Christ, the great Re - deem - er, died For hu - man crea - tures' sin.
 Here, Lord, I give my - self a - way; 'Tis all that I can do.