

## **GOOD FRIDAY & THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CROSS**

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In the whole wide world everyone has seen a Cross. Everyone knows that Jesus died on a Cross and that a Cross is the symbol of Christian religion. But today Cross has become a fashion. I have seen not only Christians but young persons of other faiths also wearing a Cross on a chain or even as ear-rings. Sometimes people ask me for Bible and other literature of Jesus Christ and also a Cross.

In spite of such popularity of the Cross not many people know about the real meaning of the Cross nor its spirituality. The Good Friday gives us an opportunity to know the significance and the spirituality of the Cross. The words of Jesus himself can help us to understand the meaning and the spirituality of the Cross. The four Gospels together give us seven 'words' or utterances of Jesus spoken from the Cross.

The seven different utterances of Jesus, spoken from the Cross, are found in the New Testament. The four evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - together give the seven utterances or Jesus' words from the Cross. Jesus spoke them as he hanged on the Cross. The first of the seven sentences is given both by Matthew and Mark in their Gospels, "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" (Mt. 27, 46 & Mk 15, 34).

Jesus remained always in constant contact with his heavenly Father during his whole life on earth. Indeed, Jesus often told his disciples that, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10, 30). "My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt. 11, 27). "That you may know once and for all that the Father is in me and that I am in the Father" (Jn. 10, 38).

Jesus addressed God calling him 'Father' not by any other name. Here, Jesus is not calling but he is imploring his Father. Mathew and Mark have put Jesus' pleading to his Father in the same words, "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" (Mt. 27, 46; Mk 15, 34).

This cry of anguish remind us the first verse of Psalm number 22 which says,

"My God, My God, why have you  
abandoned me?  
I have cried desperately for help,  
but still does not come" (Ps 22, 1).

What do we understand when we hear this cry of anguish of Jesus from the Cross? We see the encounter of the great power of divine love and the satanic evil power. Did Jesus hanging on the Cross feel that in the encounter of the power of love and of the satanic power of evil, God, his Father has abandoned him? Or does Jesus wants to teach us that in the encounter of the good and the evil, there may not be always poetical Justice?

Those who fought for truth like Gandhiji and Martin Luther King did not die a natural death but they were martyred by the bullets of their satanic killers. When Jesus cries with anguish from the

Cross, we know that he has deeply felt and experienced the abandonment of his heavenly Father. When we human beings have to tread the deep valley of abandonment, we know that Jesus has gone on the same way before us on the darkest path of human life. Jesus' cry of anguish in the hopeless situation encourages us to keep our faith in God in similar predicament.

The second utterance of Jesus from the Cross is a pleading for his persecutors. Jesus said, "Father! They don't know what they are doing." (Lk 23, 34). Jesus often spoke to his disciples and the crowd milling around him during his three-year long public life that they should forgive one-another.

Once the leader of the twelve disciples, Peter even asked Jesus specifically. "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?'"

"No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven" (Mt 18, 21-22). That is to say, there is no limit in forgiving.

When Jesus prays for forgiveness even during his excruciating pain of hanging on the Cross, then we can understand and appreciate the heart of Jesus and the power of the Cross. When Jesus prays that, "Father forgive them" he does not specify exactly who are exactly he is praying for forgiveness from his heart. Jesus is pleading for forgiveness not only for those who clamour for his capital punishment and for those who carry out the order of capital punishment but Jesus is pleading for forgiveness of the entire humanity for their crimes and sins. The meaning of the Cross and its spirituality is that Jesus by his own Cross won forgiveness for the whole humankind.

The third utterance which Jesus spoke from the Cross was his words to the good criminal saying, "I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me" (Lk 23, 43). We know that together with Jesus two criminals were also crucified. One of them like his enemies and detractors has insulted Jesus saying, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Lk 23, 39). But the other criminal rebuked him saying, "Don't you fear God? You received the same sentence he did. Ours, however, is only right, because we are getting what we deserve for what we did; but he has done no wrong' And he said to Jesus, 'Remember me, Jesus when you come as King!'"

"Jesus said to him, 'I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me'" (Lk 23, 41-43).

In the response of Jesus to the good criminal we can see a number of important things. The first, the criminal acknowledges that he is a sinner, a criminal. But in the response of Jesus there is no reference to the criminal's crime or punishment but only his forgiveness and blessing. Jesus assures the criminal that today he would be with Jesus in Paradise. In other words hanging from the Cross Jesus assures the criminal the unconditional love of his heavenly Father. Then, saying "with me", Jesus assures us, sinners, that he, Jesus, is with us. With unconditional love Jesus forgives the criminal and blesses him. Similarly, from the Cross Jesus continues to bless all people with his unconditional love. So Jesus tells us that the Cross is no more the sign of punishment but of blessings and love.

The fourth utterance of Jesus hanging on the Cross is “Father! In your hands I place my spirit!” (Lk 23, 26). Here we can see the complete trust of Jesus in God, his Father. Here we may recall that in the Psalm 31 the devotee expresses his/her complete trust in the Lord God entrusting himself/herself completely at the feet of the Lord God; it is a prayer of trust in God,

“I come to you, LORD, for protection;  
Never let me be defeated.  
You are a righteous God;  
Save me, I pray!  
Hear me! Save me now!  
Be my refuge to protect me;  
My defence to save me” (Ps. 31, 1-2).

Hanging on the Cross amidst excruciating pain Jesus offers himself to his Father and tells us that if there is any solution to the sin and evil of the world, it is in carrying the Cross like Jesus and offering oneself to God the Father! We do not understand the mystery of sin or its meaning and significance. But we are consoled in offering ourselves to God the Father like Jesus did. Surrounded with suffering and sin, that we are, we can find solace in the Cross of Jesus. Indeed the Cross of Jesus is the refuge of sinners.

The fifth utterance of Jesus hanging on the Cross is the words spoken to his mother and to his beloved disciples.

“Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, ‘He is your son.’

“Then he said to the disciple, ‘She is your mother” (Jn 19, 26-27).

Only the fourth Gospel says that the disciple Jesus loved was standing near the Cross. In the Gospel according to Mark when the enemies of Jesus come to arrest him in Gethsemane garden, Mark says, “then all the disciples left him and ran away” (Mk. 14, 50). When Jesus was raised on the Cross there were some women standing close by and watching everything. Mark says “some women were there looking on from a distance” (Mk. 15, 40). But in John’s narration of the scene of crucifixion we see only the Mother of Jesus and his beloved disciple John. Jesus entrusts them to the care of one-another. Here we can see the humaneness of Jesus amidst his untold pain and suffering on the Cross.

In the Gospel according to John the Mother of Jesus first appeared with his disciples in the marriage feast of Cana. The mother of Jesus is seen a second time only at the foot of the Cross in John’s Gospel! Here we see that more than the relationship of mother and son, Jesus seems to welcome his mother among his disciples.

In Mark’s Gospel we see that once the mother of Jesus goes to meet her son who is surrounded by a crowd of people sitting around him listening to him. When Jesus gets the message that his mother is outside the house looking for him, he responds with a question “who is my mother?” Mark narrates, “He looked at the people sitting round him and said, ‘Look! Here are my mother

and my brothers! Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother” (Mk. 3, 34-35). Here while Jesus welcomes his mother among his disciples he welcomes us – everyone – among his disciples. Hanging on the Cross amidst untold suffering Jesus takes care of us as his disciples. Besides, Jesus indicates that his mother Mary is also our Mother.

The sixth utterance of Jesus from the Cross is, “I am thirsty”. John writes, “Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed; and in order to make the scripture come true, he said, ‘I am thirsty’” (Jn. 19, 28). Here, the words of Jesus show much more than his physical thirst. In his Gospel John speaks many things in symbolic language. Here as John says specifically “in order to make the scripture come true, he said, ‘I am thirsty’.

It is not clear to us which words of scripture he is referring to. Perhaps he is referring to Psalm number 22 which says,

“My throat is as dry as dust,  
and my tongue sticks to the roof of  
my mouth” (Ps 22, 15).

Once Jesus said that “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me” (Jn 12, 32). Jesus’ thirst could be a thirst for drawing all people to himself. The self offering of Jesus on the Cross is for the salvation of all people that they may walk on the path trodden by him – a life spent for others.

The last utterance of Jesus hanging on the Cross is “It is finished” (Jn. 19, 30).

In another place offering his own life for his sheep as a good shepherd Jesus said, “No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will” (Jn. 10, 18).

Now at the end of his life on earth Jesus can truly say, “It is finished”. Jesus became a human being on earth to do the mission which his Father entrusted to him. Let people say, with his death on the Cross Jesus’ life has miserably failed. On the other hand, Jesus says hanging on the Cross that he has finished the mission entrusted to him by his Father.

In reality the Cross is a deep mystery of faith. As St. Paul says, “For, the message about Christ’s death On the Cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God’s power” (1 Cor. 1, 18). (words 2057, Contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in) & [www.vpaulsj.org](http://www.vpaulsj.org))

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