

SECOND LAST WORD FROM THE CROSS

“Amen, amen, I say to you. Today you will be with me in Paradise”

One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Devil at Four O’Clock*, starring Spencer Tracy and Frank Sinatra. I love this movie because it is such a beautiful story of redemption.

The movie opens with a cargo plane landing at a small South Pacific island in French Polynesia for a two-day layover. On board are six people —two pilots, three convicts en route to a penitentiary in Tahiti, and a young missionary priest who is going to replace the island’s grizzled, old missionary, Father Doonan, because of the islanders’ complaints against him. The three prisoners—a Frenchman, a tall, strong Black man, and an American from New Jersey—are marched off and locked in the local jail while the young priest walks to the church where he has been assigned. When he arrives, he finds Fr. Doonan unshaven, disheveled, and drinking. Perhaps all islanders’ stories and complaints are true, the young priest thinks.

But as the movie progresses, you discover the real story. When Fr. Doonan first arrived on the island many years before, he was wildly popular with the islanders—that is, until Fr. Doonan discovered the islanders’ dirty secret. For years, they had been abandoning children with leprosy in the jungle, leaving them to die—all in fear of losing their reputation as the perfect South Pacific island resort for the rich and famous and the money that came with them.

Fr. Doonan was horrified when he learned of this evil. He resisted the islanders and built an orphanage in the center of the island, on the slope of a dormant volcano, in order to care for the leper children.

In response, the townsfolk punished the priest by refusing to go to Church and stopping their support for Fr. Doonan. This forced Fr. Doonan to go day by day, door to door, to beg the islanders for food and supplies to help the leper colony.

In time, the pressure of the scorn, rejection and the lack of support from the islanders got to Fr. Doonan. It beat him up emotionally and spiritually —so much that he started drinking and he became an alcoholic—losing both his dignity and his faith in God. And it was Fr. Doonan's drinking problem that conveniently provided the islanders with the excuse to get rid of the old, bothersome priest.

When Fr. Doonan learns from his young priest replacement about the 3 prisoners in the local jail, he goes and asks the governor of the island to lend him the three convicts for a day to do some needed work at the leper colony. The governor agrees.

The next day, on their return from the orphanage, the island's volcano begins to erupt. The governor orders an evacuation. Since a freighter had just left the day before, the governor first plans to evacuate the island with one seaplane and a schooner which means that many people would be left behind. But then,

having heard about the impending volcanic eruption over the radio, the freighter miraculously reappears at the island port, and the majority of the islanders get on the freighter to escape.

But the leper children and volunteer staff are still at the orphanage on the slope of the volcano. Father Doonan is desperate to rescue them. The young priest, whose leg was broken with the first volcanic tremor, can't help with the rescue mission. So, Father Doonan convinces the governor to parachute him and the three prisoners into the center of the island to rescue the children. In the hope of getting their sentences commuted, the three convicts agree to join Father Doonan in the rescue mission. The captain of the schooner also agrees to wait for them until 4:00 pm the next day when he will be forced to leave because of the tides and impending eruption.

After parachuting into island's center, the priest and the convicts get to the orphanage. Then the priest, the convicts, the orphanage staff and children begin a journey down the mountain to the town, facing all kinds of obstacles—fire, lava, and strong volcanic tremors.

Along the way, the French convict drowns in muddy quicksand, saving a child and praying as he goes under. His prayer makes a deep impression on the other two hardened convicts.

The second convict—the tall, strong black man—is fatally injured when the bridge he is bracing collapses, crushing his chest. Mortally wounded but conscious, the convict continues to

hold the damaged bridge until everyone else gets safely across—everyone except Father Doonan who decides to stay with badly injured convict to care for him.

The third convict, the American, accompanies the children and staff to the dock and puts them on the schooner.

Meanwhile Fr. Doonan is comforting the prisoner who is mortally wounded. The convict feels like he has no chance with God because of his terrible criminal past. But Fr. Doonan tells him the story of the Good Thief on the cross, and how Jesus saved him at the very end, simply because the good thief put his faith in Jesus and asked Jesus to *“remember him.”*

And then Fr. Doonan says, *“And do you know what Jesus said to the criminal? He said the beautiful words, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you. Today you will be with me in Paradise.’”*

The criminal smiles at Fr. Doonan and says, *“Wow! He was a really good thief. He stole heaven at the end.”*

As Fr. Doonan is absolving the dying convict of his sins, the last prisoner returns to the bridge. Instead of going with the children and staff on the schooner and saving himself, he decides to return to the priest and his friend who is dying. He was a Catholic who had fallen away from his faith. But, now seeing the priest absolve his friend’s sins and hearing the priest pray the Act of Contrition, it moves him to kneel down, make the Sign of the Cross, and join the priest in the prayer.

When Fr. Doonan looks up and sees this hardened criminal's act of faith and sorrow, it restores his own faith in God and his priesthood, just as the volcanic island explodes.

As I mentioned earlier, I love this movie because it is such a beautiful story about redemption—the redemption that everyone was offered on that first Good Friday long ago.

And I especially love the convict's response to Fr. Doonan, *"Wow, he was a really good thief. He stole heaven at the end."*

The fact is, brothers and sisters, we all *"steal heaven"* because of God's amazing grace. We are like the Good Thief, in that way. We don't deserve God's mercy. We did nothing and we can do nothing to earn it. But, in His infinite goodness, our loving God freely offers us His Divine Mercy.

And God is just waiting for us to accept it. All we need to do is have the humility and trust of the Good Thief and say, as the Good Thief did, *"Jesus, remember me...remember me today and every day with Your Mercy; so that one day, I, too, can be with You in Paradise."* Amen!

FOURTH WORD FROM THE CROSS

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned Me?"

In one of his famous Good Friday Seven Last Words service, Archbishop Fulton Sheen stated that each of the Seven Words that Jesus spoke from the cross was a saving word for a certain group of people. In other words, Jesus allowed Himself to feel

what those people were feeling or going through so that He could save those people.

For example, for those who are burdened by an addiction of some sort—whether that be alcohol, drugs, money, sex, pornography, pleasure, fame or something else—for all those who have that unquenchable thirst to be satisfied by the thing to which they are addicted, but never find relief—Jesus allowed Himself to feel that thirst when he said, “*I thirst.*” And with that word saved those people.

The Fourth Word that Jesus spoke from the cross is a saving word for all those people who have felt the devastation of losing a loved one, or suffered the loss of a job and the economic hardship and anxiety it causes, or suffered through a divorce or the break-up of a friendship or the loss of one’s reputation or the guilt of something done in the past, and especially the hellish agony of the sense of separation from God that sin creates within us. Jesus allowed Himself to feel that pain when He cried out the fourth of His Last Words: “*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*”

Why did Jesus allow Himself to feel that pain? Hebrews 4:15 tells us, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.*” Jesus never sinned. So, to redeem all those caught in the sadness, desperation, despair and the sense of abandonment that sin causes in life, with this word, Jesus allowed Himself to feel all those feelings, without actually sinning.

For the Fourth Word from the cross, Jesus prayed the first part of Psalm 22—a psalm tailor-made for His needs. Psalm 22 begins, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” which expresses the sadness and despair of someone who feels abandoned by God. As I mentioned earlier, in praying this, Jesus allowed Himself to feel that sense of loss, sadness, bitterness, disappointment that sin causes in the world and in people’s lives—in order to save those who have experienced this despair or are experiencing it or will experience it.

There are so many people listening to this who have gone through or presently are going through that pain of sadness and abandonment. As a pastor, every week I meet people who are walking through dark valleys. I can’t count the times I have been at bedsides where people are crying and mourning the death of a spouse or a child or a parent or a dear friend. The pain and darkness are overwhelming. They feel as if God has abandoned them. My family and I just went through it with the sudden death of the second youngest member of our family, my brother John.

Connected to this, I also have met many people who are suffering through the spiritual darkness—the dark night of soul—questioning whether God is real or whether God really cares—because of some trauma in their lives. Mother Teresa of Calcutta went through this for several years.

But our hope today comes in the second part of the Psalm which is a hymn of triumph and thanksgiving to God who has heard the psalmist’s prayer. The psalm ends with the proclamation of vindication and joy: “*I will proclaim your name to my brethren. . . . Let the coming generation be told of the Lord that they may proclaim to a people yet to be born the justice He has shown.*” God will bring a victory.

We so need to hear this Fourth Word from the Cross! Jesus has been through everything we experience. We know He cares. His fourth word from the cross brings us consolation and redemption.

I would like to conclude with a lovely little poem by Lenora McWhorter:

When my hopes fade
And my dreams die.
And I find no answer
By asking why.
I just keep on trusting
And hang on to my faith.
Because God is just
He never makes mistakes.

Should the storms come
And trials I must face.
When I find no solution
I rest in God's grace.
When life seems unfair
And more than I can take.
I look up to the Father
He never makes mistakes.

God sees our struggles
And every bend in the road.
But no mistake is ever made
Cause He weighs every load.

Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY A 2020

In his marvelous book, “*Rediscovering Catholicism*,” Matthew Kelly tells a powerful story that seemed so apropos for this Good Friday when we are still in the middle of the coronavirus crisis. Let me share it with you.

“Imagine this ... you're driving home from work next Friday after a long day. You tune in your radio. You hear a blurb about a little village in India where some villagers have died suddenly, strangely, of a flu that has never been seen before. It's not influenza, but three or four people are dead. It is kind of interesting so they are sending some doctors to India to investigate it.

You don't think much about it, but coming home from church on Sunday you hear another radio spot. Only this time they say it's not three villagers, it's 30,000 villagers in the back hills of this particular area of India, and it's on TV that night. CNN runs a little blurb: people are heading there from the disease center in Atlanta because this disease strain has never been seen before.

By Monday morning, when you get up, it's the lead story. It's not just India; now it's Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Before you know it, you're hearing this story everywhere. They have coined it as “*the mystery flu*.”

The President has made some comment that he and his family are praying and hoping that all will go well over there. But everyone in the media is wondering, “*How are we going to contain it?*”

That's when the President of France makes an announcement that shocks Europe. He is closing their borders. No flights from India, Pakistan, or any of the countries where this thing has been seen.

And that night, before falling asleep, while you are watching CNN, your jaw hits your chest when a weeping woman says that there's a man lying

in a hospital in Paris, dying of the mystery flu. It has come to Europe.

Panic strikes. As best they can tell, after contracting the disease, you have it for a week before you even know it. Then you have four days of unbelievable symptoms. And then you die.

Britain closes its borders, but it's too late. People in South Hampton, Liverpool, and North Hampton have the mystery flu.

It's Tuesday morning when the President of the United States makes the following announcement: *"Due to a national-security risk, all flights to and from Europe and Asia have been canceled. If your loved ones are overseas, I'm sorry, but they cannot come back until we find a cure for this thing."*

Within four days, our nation has been plunged into an unbelievable fear. People are wondering, *"What if it comes to this country?"* Some preachers

on are saying that it's the scourge of God.

It's Wednesday night, and you are at a church prayer meeting when somebody runs in from the parking lot and yells, *"Turn on the radio! Turn on the radio!"* And while everyone in church

listens to the radio, the announcement is made: two women are lying in a Long Island hospital, dying from the mystery flu.

Within hours it seems, this disease envelops the country. Even though people are working around the clock, trying to find a vaccine, nothing is working. There are new cases in California, Oregon, Arizona, Florida, and Massachusetts. It's as though it's just sweeping in from every border.

And then all of a sudden the news comes out. The code has been broken. A cure can be found. A vaccine can be made. But it's going to take the blood of somebody who hasn't been infected.

And so, sure enough, all across the world, through all the channels of

emergency broadcasting, everyone is asked to do one simple thing: *“Go to your local hospital and have your blood tested. That's all we ask of you. When you hear the sirens go off in your neighborhood, please make your way quickly, quietly, and safely to the hospitals.”*

Sure enough, when you and your family get down there late on that Friday night, there is a long line. They have nurses and doctors coming out and pricking fingers, taking a blood sample, and putting labels on it.

You, your spouse and your son are there. They take your blood and say, *“Wait here in the parking lot. If we call your name, you can be dismissed and go home.”*

You stand around, scared, with your neighbors, wondering what on earth is going on, and if this is the end of the world.

Suddenly, a young man comes running out of the hospital screaming. He's yelling a name and waving a clipboard. What? He yells it again! And your son tugs on your jacket and says, "*Daddy, that's me.*"

Before you know it, they have grabbed your boy. "*Wait a minute, hold on!*" And they say, "*It's okay, his blood is clean. His blood is pure. We want to make sure he doesn't have the disease. We think he has the right blood type.*"

Five tense minutes later, out come the doctors and nurses. They are crying and hugging one another—some are even laughing. It's the first time you have seen anybody laugh in a week. An old doctor walks up to you and says, "*Thank you, sir. Your son's blood is perfect. It's clean, it is pure, and we can make the vaccine.*"

As the word begins to spread all across that parking lot full of folks, people are screaming in joy, praying, laughing and crying. But then the gray-haired doctor pulls you and your wife aside and says, "*May we see you for a moment? We didn't realize that the donor would be a child and we need... we need you to sign a consent form.*" You begin to sign. And then you see that the box for the number of pints of blood needed to be taken is empty.

"*H-h-h-how many pints?*" And that is when the old doctor's smile fades, and he says, "*We had no idea it would be a child. We weren't prepared. We need it all!*"

"*But... but... I don't understand. He's my son, my only child!*"

"*We are talking about the world here. Please sign. We... we... need to hurry!*"

“But can't you give him a transfusion?”

“If we had clean blood we would. Will you please sign?”

In numb silence you do.

Then they say, *“Would you like to have a moment with him before we begin?”*

How would you feel as you walked back to that room where your only child sits on a table saying, *“Daddy? Mommy? What's going on?”* Could you take his hands and say, *“Son, your mommy and I love you with all our hearts. And we would never ever let anything happen to you that didn't just have to be! Do you understand that?”*

Then the old doctor returns and says, *“I'm sorry, we've got to get started. People all over the world are dying, could you leave?”*

How would you feel as you walked out while your son is saying, *“Dad? Mom? Why... why are you abandoning me?”*

And then the following week, when they are holding a national funeral service to honor your son and his sacrifice, you see a lot of folks sleeping through the service. Now that they are safe from the disease, many others don't even bother to come because they are busy and have better things to do, Some folks complain that the national broadcast of your son's funeral is interrupting their sports or with their shopping.

Wouldn't you want to jump up and say, *“EXCUSE ME! MY SON, MY ONLY CHILD, DIED FOR YOU SO THAT YOU COULD LIVE! DON'T YOU CARE? DOESN'T IT MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?”*

Brothers and sisters, I wonder, is that what God wants to say to us today on this Good Friday during this crisis?

“EXCUSE ME! MY SON, MY ONLY CHILD, DIED FOR YOU SO THAT YOU COULD LIVE! DON’T YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I CARE? DOESN’T IT MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?”