

# INTO THY HANDS

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## CrossWords Series (Part 7)

**Begin by reading: Luke 23:44-49**

Today, as never before, we stand “**at a distance, watching things**” (Luke 23:49). I don’t need to elaborate much on the “distance” part. But I do want to reflect on this “watching things” idea. Most of us, I imagine, have spent an unusually high number of hours over these past weeks at home, watching TV. We’ve gotten embroiled in the news reports and the weather reports and maybe the comedy shows to lighten our mood in what feels like such a heavy, dark time. I suspect, however, that many of us have also watched a lot of dramas or mysteries or other such shows.

The screen culture of our narrative age is powerful, to say the least. We watch so many programs that it is only natural that we begin to view reality and history through the plotlines we meet in these programs. That can even be true with Good Friday, I think. If we’re not careful, the story of Calvary can become to us just another sentimental, predictable, program to us.

For example, Good Friday can look quite a bit like one of those POLICE SHOWS we’ve watched. Jesus is hauled in on bogus charges, tortured while in custody, and then killed by a corrupt Jerusalem Justice Department. As so often when watching shows like this, we’re left with moist eyes and clenched fists over the injustice of the world. How often do the righteous suffer while the bad go free?

Or Good Friday can seem quite a bit like one of those MEDICAL DRAMAS a lot of us have watched recently. We can get wrapped up in the forensic details of Christ’s death on the cross – in the symptoms of his suffering or the agony of his slow asphyxiation. COVID-19 has freshly introduced us to horrific conditions like these. Good Friday can hook our emotions, because it puts us in touch with the terrible pain and loss we’ve suffered or continue to witness now in our time.

Or, I suppose, Good Friday can become for us one of those nail-biting MURDER MYSTERIES we may have watched. Somebody’s been killed and now you’re left to figure out who’s to blame. Is it the obvious culprit, Judas, who betrayed Jesus? Or the less obvious candidate, Pilate, who didn’t have the guts to stand up for an innocent man? Can we pin the wrap on Peter who abandoned him? Or the Pharisees who plotted against him? Or the Palm Sunday crowd who turned on him? Or is it like *Murder On the Orient Express*, where everybody has had a hand in the crime?

Whether you look at the events on Golgotha as a story about injustice or forensics or murder, there is one clear plot-thread that links them all. Good Friday appears to be one of those VICTIM STORIES. It seems to be the tale of an unusually noble person

whose life is tragically taken but leaves a legacy that moves the sentiments of many. We feel sorry for Jesus. We're inspired by him. At least briefly. For sooner or later, we turn the Good Friday program off. We switch channels to some other story that grabs our attention or stirs our emotions. Whether its sweet or sorrowful, that momentary rush of fascination or feeling that even a compelling story like the Cross provides, can be found plenty of places. We're rarely changed much by the programs we watch – not even Jesus TV.

Some years ago, I attended a Passover Seder – one of those services, where each element of a meal was designed to help the family at the table REMEMBER how God saves. The rabbi presiding at this Seder told a story that brought some sentimental mist to everyone's eyes. He explained how it was the tradition of Jewish people to go up to the Temple at Jerusalem three times a year to make atonement for their sins.

When you got there, you would shell out some hard-earned cash and buy yourself a beautiful little lamb, that had been raised and sold for just this purpose. The priest would then ask you to place your hands on the lamb and confess all your sins. In this act, you would symbolically transfer all your dark blemishes onto that spotless animal. Then the priest would pull out a knife – and hand it to you. As the little lamb wagged its tail and looked up at you with those soft eyes, it was YOUR job to take that lamb's life. And as the creature's lifeblood ran out into a basin at your feet, you would know how costly SIN was. You would grasp what a terrible price was paid to set you free.

That's a sentimental story. As some of you are feeling in your home and heart right now, it horrifies. It pulls the heart-strings. It makes people cry. But month after month, year after year, people kept on coming back to the Temple at Jerusalem and doing that act all over again. Why, because as heart-rending as it was, the sacrifice of that innocent lamb didn't change people, much. They kept on sinning. They kept on living the way they had before the crisis they called Passover.

When it is rightly viewed and taken in, Good Friday is not a program like that. It has a different effect. You see, despite initial appearances, Good Friday isn't truly like that sentimental story or the other shows we watch. Good Friday isn't about a helpless victim. It's not about a hopeless, hapless lamb who just innocently got caught in the machinery of injustice, or death, or a murdering world. It's not about someone we can feel sorry for for a little while and then move on from, because after all he is just an animal or just a character in a story. Good Friday is about a very real and very present and very awesome Someone who did Something that follows us always and faces us afresh tonight.

Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples a few months before he went to the Cross. **I am the Good Shepherd... I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (John 10:18).** Did you hear that? No one took Christ's life from him. No one accidentally infected him. No government forced his fate upon him. Jesus voluntarily gave up his life, not like some helpless lamb

who can't escape the grip of Sin, but like the Supreme Shepherd, the Great Physician, purposely choosing to place himself in harm's way to save the truly vulnerable ones.

Jesus knows what the disease of sin does. He understands that the outcome of sin is death (Rom 6:23). But even though He had every right and freedom to do otherwise, the one fully healthy human being in the Universe, voluntarily put himself into the HotZone and absorbed the full fever of sin in his body. The only truly blemishless figure who has ever lived, offered himself up as the sacrificial lamb to atone for your sins and mine. We call this Good Friday because this was the day when Jesus pushed humanity out of the way and took the full force of sin and death upon himself, so that you and I might be one of the ones who recover, one of the ones who go free.

What moved Jesus to do that? It was his perfect love, his amazing grace. **Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13).** We find this heart in every echo of his teaching. We meet it in every one of his miracles. We see it in his march to Calvary. We hear it in his words from the Cross. And every time you forgive someone who has hurt you or try again at a relationship others tell us to give up on... Each time you humbly yield to the preferences of another or give of your substance to meet a need... Throughout this whole season when you dare to persevere in putting the well-being of other people before your own freedom and comfort... You are reflecting the self-surrendering grace we meet at the Cross.

Alongside love, I believe there is a final motivation behind Christ's courage to do what he did. Luke records it like this: **Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:46).** With one word added -- "Abba," Daddy -- Jesus repeated the prayer from Psalm 31 that every Jewish mom taught her children to say before laying their heads down to sleep. With this seventh and final statement, Jesus ended his human life, just as he'd lived it every step of the way -- with the courage of a child able to face the darkness, because he knew he was safe in the hands of a loving parent.

Do you know that YOU are too? Do you know that when you risk extending yourself in grace to another... taking the form of a servant... sacrificing what this world holds dear to advance the kingdom... that you will be ultimately safer doing this than running from discipleship and burying yourself in a video screen? There are some truths that it is hard to see from the darkness that surrounds the cross -- or where you and the other people of our world are sitting right now. But let's keep watching... Let's be patient in our waiting... for a new morning is coming.

Please pray with me... *Gracious Father, like our Savior Christ before us, **into thy hands** we commit all that we are, in the hope for all that by the power of his Holy Spirit, we all may yet be. Meet us now in this sacrament of Holy Communion, that even at a distance we may be your grace be ONE with one another and with you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*