

You would think that the last words of dying people would tell us something about them; whether they were kind or mean, or self-centered or humble, or witty or bitter, or trusting or resentful; loving and forgiving or full of hate and vengeful. And the words should tell us the state of mind of the person at the end of his or her life. I spent some time these past days searching for the last words of famous persons, and the words and thoughts run the gamut of emotions.

There is the humorous: “Dying is easy; comedy is hard.” This from the actor Edmund Guinn. You might know him as Santa Clause from the movie, “Miracle on 34th Street.”

Author and social critic Oscar Wilde, who held up a glass of champagne and remarked just before his death, “And now, I die beyond my means.”

Some last words were profound, but prosaic and simple rather than poetic, unintentionally profound perhaps, and so, all the more moving, “Let us pass over the river and rest under the shade of the trees,” said Stonewall Jackson moments before his death.

The famous evangelical preacher Dwight Moody, claiming victory on his deathbed in what seems an ecstatic fervor, “This is my triumph; this is my coronation day. It is glorious!”

There were enigmatic statements. “Light. More light!” cried out German poet and mystic, Goethe. Did he demand more illumination for his soul in this last moment, or did he simply want someone to open the window, as many scholars have suggested?

J.H. Huxley, professor and agnostic, said, “So it is true.” Did he look over and see emptiness as he expected, or did he recognize the mistake of disbelief as he gazed into heaven or hell?

For some death came unexpectedly. “Never felt better,” Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. replied to the nurse, and then died later that day.

“They can't hit us at this distance,” said the Yankee general, only he didn't finish the word 'distance' before the bullet struck him down.

Some are sad, in a forlorn sense like the words of Queen Elizabeth I, “All my possessions for a moment of time”; or come from what must have been an empty heart, “Did I play my role well? Then why don't you applaud?” said Augustus, the Roman emperor. Some are sad and fill us

with disdain because of the ruthless tone, “There are no more worlds to conquer,” Alexander the Great is reported to have said, weeping, as he died.

Some people have faced death defiantly, “Step forward, lads. It will be easier that way,” shouted Erskine Childers to the firing squad.

Philosophers may have doubted their entire lives, but at the end perhaps questioned their doubt, and despaired. “It is my turn to leap into the darkness,” said Thomas Hobbes the English philosopher. David Hume said, “I am in flames.” And perhaps one of the most wrenching deathbed statements ever came from Sir Francis Newport, head of the England Infidel Club. “Do not tell me there is no God, for I know there is one, and that I am in his angry presence. You need not tell me there is no hell, for I already feel my soul slipping into its fires. Cease your idle talk about there being hope for me; I know I am lost forever.”

Well, I could continue. Many people have come and gone in this world, and most of them talked before they left. And maybe I've talked too much and already taken too much time, but I don't think so because of what we are dealing with here: death. How do you face it? How did Jesus face it? And how do his last words compare with these just quoted?

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” What does this tell us about Jesus? That he died praying. Prayer after prayer from the cross- a selfless prayer for others, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”; a prayer of anguished beseeching, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” And here, a prayer of humility and consummation. These words were not a final attempt to get into God's good graces, not a deathbed confession; there is no bitterness or carping at God, Jesus didn't waste any time feeling sorry for himself; there is no resignation, no desperation, but instead, perfect trust in God, the one he called Father. He died as he lived, trusting God, and his last words from the cross show remarkable continuity with his first words from Luke's gospel. Do you remember what he said, at 12 years of age, to his parents when they found him in the temple? “Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?” His spirit was committed to God from youth to death. What an appropriate last word from Jesus, the faithful and obedient son, “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

Five times in Luke Jesus spoke about being delivered into the hands of men, or the hands of the religious leaders, or Gentiles laying hands upon him to kill him, and now, on the cross, he gives himself over to God. Out of their hands and into the hands of his Father. At last into the hands of the

Father after the world has done its worst. Jesus had put his life into the hands of the Creator, and trusted absolutely the God of love, the faithful God of Abraham, the powerful and forgiving God of Israel's history, and so was really never subject to those earthly powers that would kill him; or fate or destiny, or the lesser gods that would control him: human frailty, fear, or pride.

What about us? Are we able to say we are about our Father's business, do we entrust our lives to God? The cross meant death to Jesus; we believe that it means life to us. But a particular kind of life. It means a life that confronts death, comes to grips with the reality of death- our own death. Jesus said if anyone would follow him, that person must take up the cross daily. That does not mean each of us has burdens to bear, to suffer through- an illness, or an poorly developed sense of humor, being too short or too tall, bothersome neighbors, or a difficult career path, business failures, lost love; any of these or any of the thousands of other things that flesh is heir to. These are not our crosses to bear. The cross is an instrument of death, and it is an instrument of our death. "Take up your cross *daily*," Jesus said, and in a strange paradox, we abide at the cross. We confront not just our problems, but our death, every day. Taking up the

cross doesn't mean simply giving something up for the forty days of Lent, forsaking meat, or cheese, or a worldly pleasure like Dr Pepper or chocolate, but every day giving up our self to God. Daily praying, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." How do we deal with a world that is so often full of sorrow and darkness and labor and betrayal and pain and fear and separation, and always, eventually, the grave? By giving our life into the hands of God and not into the hands of these. By taking up the cross and daily praying, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." And thus, will we never come to our deathbed begging in despair, or cursing in rage and fear, or agonizing over the doubt. For when we give our spirit to God, God gives his Spirit to us.

"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." How might these last words be manifested in our lives? What does it mean truly to give our lives over to God, and daily to take up our cross? Well, it may mean you will die for Christ- many have, or at least you may suffer, or labor through hardship for the gospel, or be embarrassed or humiliated for Christ. The world is not timid about sacrificing those who put their lives into the hands of God. But we may *not*, we are not permitted, just to go blithely along, life as usual,

same as it ever was. Something has happened. Jesus died. And when he breathed his last, the centurion at the foot of the cross saw, and “gave praise to God, and said, ‘this man was innocent,’” or “just,” or “righteous.” The word could be translated several ways. And so let Jesus on the cross be our example of innocence and justice and righteousness taking up the cross, and let us live so that the neighbor or the co-worker or the classmate, or the family down the street- people like you or different from you, or the person in the pew next to you- let us live so that people may glorify God as they behold your innocent and just and righteous life, committed to the Father.

God is not easy. Dying is hard. Taking up your cross is difficult. But the Father who made you and loves you- loves you through the cross of Jesus- is the only God worth dying for, and worth living for. When God calls you to life, he calls you to die, that is, to give your life to him; and when God calls you to die, God gives you life, life that is full and meaningful and unending.