

6 April 2022 Luke 23:44-56 Pastor Fraser Pearce

When I was in my first year of seminary
I took a course on the introduction to Christian spirituality.
The course was led by Vic Pfitzner, known to many of you here.
I remember one lecture in particular,
Where Dr Pfitzner was getting us to think about what the word 'trust' means,
Especially when we use it in relation to God,
And to help us understand he told us about
An aspect of his childhood growing up in the Riverland,
Where his father was a pastor.

Picture this: In one of the rooms of the manse where they lived
There was a large wardrobe.
And young Victor with his siblings, would climb the wardrobe,
And, with their dad waiting beneath,
They would take turns is leaping off the wardrobe into his waiting arms.
Dr Pfitzner described the freedom that this loving trust
Brought with it when he was a child:
Victor and his siblings knew that their dad loved them,
That he was strong to catch them,
That they would be safe as they jumped from the top of the wardrobe:
They knew that they could entrust themselves to him.

A child leaping into the strong arms of his dad:
That's a very memorable image,
And Dr Pfitzner encouraged us to apply this imagery to God,
And to think about the freedom that comes
As we trust God according to his gracious word to us
In Christ Jesus,
As we commend ourselves to God:
To his mercy, to his strength, to his love.

No doubt you have had your own experience
Of what it's like to entrust yourself to another person:
And perhaps you've experienced the freedom that comes
When your trust has been vindicated:
When this happens, we grow in love for the other person.
Perhaps, on the other hand, you've experienced the disappointment

That occurs when trust has been broken.
When this happens, it can be very difficult to repair relationships.

Well, tonight we have good news from the Gospel:
Our Lord entrusted himself wholly to his Father,
And, as we will soon celebrate, this trust was wholly vindicated
In his victory over death and the grave.
This means that we, who are in Christ through holy baptism,
Are also free to entrust ourselves to the Father.
We are free to live and die with the sure hope
That we will have this trust vindicated
In the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Let's hear again the last words of Jesus from the cross
As they are recorded in the Gospel according to St Luke:
It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.

The Psalms feature prominently in our Christian understanding
Of who Jesus is.

Now, when it comes to Jesus' suffering and death,
Matthew and Mark both record Jesus' cry of dereliction:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,

Jesus is here quoting the words which open Psalm 22.

But in Luke we have Jesus taking words from Psalm 31:5

As his last words before he gives up his spirit, he says:

'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.'

Jesus, in death, entrusts himself to the one

Who will keep him safe in death,

And who will bring him, on the third day,

Into the resurrected life.

We know as Christian people that Jesus' trust in his Father
Was completely justified:
On the third day Jesus did indeed rise into new life,
And so brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel:
Through the proclamation of forgiveness of sins in his name.

Now as Christian people, who have received the Gospel,
Who have turned back to God, and who receive forgiveness in Jesus' name,
We take the same psalms on our own lips,
*But even if we are on our own when we pray the psalms,
we never pray them alone:*

It is the risen Christ who leads us in praying the psalms.
As we pray the psalms, we pray them with Jesus,
Who used these words from Scripture in his own life of prayer,
And who now intercedes in prayer for us
At the right hand of the Father.

This Psalm that our Lord prayed as his last words from the cross,
Into your hands I commend my spirit,
Is taken up by his church especially in the order of prayer called Compline,
The form of night prayer used by Christians,
And especially by those living in monastic communities,
As we go into the quasi-death of sleep.

In the order of Compline, after the brief reading from Scripture,
The whole of Psalm 31:5 is used as a response,
And here it is in the modern wording in the Australian Lutheran rite:
I put myself in your hands, Lord.

I put myself in your hands.

You have redeemed me, Lord, faithful God.

I put myself in your hands.

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I put myself in your hands.

Going into sleep is a preparation for going into death:
We are in the darkness, and we entrust ourselves to God
As we go into a real of being where we are vulnerable,
Where we are no longer focused on the direct demands of life,
And where we must wait to be woken up
By the light of the morning sun.
And so, with our Lord, who has been through the darkness of death,
And who now lives in the light of the Father,
We commend ourselves to the Father,
Trusting that just as he will keep us through the hours of sleep,

And raise us up into the new day,
So he will raise us into the resurrected life on the last day,
When death will be no more.

Of course, even though it is part of our church's liturgical life,
Most of us don't pray the night prayer of the church.
But most of us are familiar with the Small Catechism,
And maybe even use the morning and evening prayers from the catechism
AS part of our own devotional life.

Luther picks up on these words from the psalm,
And so on Jesus last words from the cross in his Morning and Evening Prayer.
Here's a more traditional version: ***For into your hands I commend myself, my
body and soul, and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe
may have no power over me.***

And here's the version we have in our Australian catechism:
***I put myself and all I have into your hands. Send your holy angels to be with
me, so that the devil will have nor power over me.***

When we pray these words we pray not just with Luther, but with Jesus,
And we have encouragement for us to entrust ourselves to God,
Knowing that in Christ God will graciously receive us.

When the young Vic Pfitzner leapt from the wardrobe
Into the waiting arms of his father,
It was not a blind leap of faith: in was based on his knowledge of his dad:
Of his dad's strength, of his dad's love, of his dad's commitment.

And this is how it is with us and God:
We do not entrust ourselves to God blindly:
We know what God is like because we have heard the Gospel:
We know that God is merciful, that he forgives sins;
We know that God is strong, that death is swallowed up in victory,
And we know that God is committed to us,
Because the cross of Christ shows us the lengths that God has gone
To win us back to himself.

So with our Lord Jesus, and, in him, with countless saints throughout the ages,
Let us commend ourselves to the father,
And rest in the hope of our own resurrection to new life.
In Jesus' name. Amen.