

Famous last words

John Sedgwick, a Union general in the American Civil war was commanding troops at the battle of Spotsylvania , was questioning his men and asking why they flinched and ducked for cover, when the Confederate forces were so far away. He told the men, “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance.” Famous last words.

They are often regarded as the most irony laden last words in history, as it is recorded that he was fatally wounded by a Confederate rifle shot only moments later.

I think that Jesus’ oft-remembered last words as he hung, dying, from the cross were perhaps even more ironic, though, because it turned out they weren’t his last words at all...

Today we have heard the account of the first Good Friday from John’s gospel, but each of the gospels give us accounts of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Each of the gospel writers vary in some of their descriptions, and sometimes emphasise different details.

One of the things that strikes me as I read the four accounts is of the inevitability of Jesus’ death, of events moving towards that moment that Jesus died. From the time he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” Jesus knew what was going to happen – just like every time we hear or read the accounts today, we know what’s going to happen!

We know the betrayal by Judas.

We know the arrest.

We know the denial by Peter.

We know the trial.

We know the scourging.

We know the crowd’s cries of ‘crucify him’

We know that long walk carrying the cross to Calvary.

We know the nails.

We know the cross being raised.

And then we have Jesus’ words. We know the last words of Jesus...

Except that the gospels give us different last words. Each of the writers or the witnesses they used to compile their accounts, would have heard Jesus say different things – and it’s quite reasonable that Jesus said them all, with each of the writers captured something different in their accounts.

Matthew and Mark tell us “About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) (Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34)

Luke gives us “Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”” (Luke 23:46)

And, as we heard this morning, John tells us that Jesus' last words were "It is finished." (John 19:30)

Of all the accounts, John's is the simplest: It is finished.

It is finished. Or 'it is accomplished' in some translations.

And we wonder, what it is, that was finished?

What could someone in total anguish; In agony, in total despair, nailed to that cross, completely alone, accomplish?

We know the full story, and we know Jesus' story isn't finished yet.

At the beginning of his ministry "...Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news".

In Jesus' life and ministry, the kingdom of God had come near.

But in Jesus' death, the kingdom of God had arrived.

And now, on that cross, it was finished. It was accomplished. It was done.

The power of sin and death had been broken.

In fact, the power of death over our lives is finished.

Death is still daunting of course, but because Jesus died. Because Jesus finished it, death is no longer the end.

But if we have our trust and faith in Jesus, and follow him, then we too, can be part of his kingdom.

The price has been paid. Death has been conquered.

For us, Jesus lived.

For us, Jesus died.

For us, Jesus uttered those famous last words, "It is finished."

Friends,

In Christ, we are forgiven

Amen.