

# Christ Speaks from the Cross

## A Great & Holy Friday Retreat

### Objective:

- We come to know Christ not by our witness alone, but by the combined witness of the Evangelists, the Apostles, the Saints, the Fathers, and of our priests and our families and our friends. We come to know God not just as individuals, but as a community.
- The four gospel narratives tell Christ's story in different ways. As Christ was hanging on the Cross, He said seven various things -- but you can only know all of them if you read more than one of the gospel accounts.
- We can learn important lessons from each of the seven things Jesus said as He was on the Cross -- many of which also point to understanding the Body of Christ (the Church) as community (communion).

### Set Up:

Divide students into appropriate age groups -- including a group of parents. Create a maximum of 7 groups. Assign each group leader 1-3 of the statements of Jesus on the cross (with 7 groups, each group gets 1, etc.)

### Basic Structure:

1. Tell elephant story
2. Discuss the way that multiple sources give us fullness of understanding
3. Discuss your group's assigned statement(s) of Christ, creating a poster for display for each statement (so that the kids are both hearing and seeing His words, even perhaps writing them down themselves, depending on how you'd like to set it up for your age group.)
4. Gather again in the big group, and do presentations on the 7 statements.
5. Try to create a time line of statements, understanding them in the order in which they occurred.
6. Wrap it up, pointing out how community/communion shows itself throughout -- from the various perspectives of the gospel writers to the diverse input of today's groups.

## 1. Introduction:

(Inspired by Joel Miller's post, 'The Trouble with Me-and-Jesus Christianity', on his Ancient Faith blog, *Theology that Sticks*)

There's an very old story about a group of blind men talking about an elephant. Because the elephant is very large, each of the blind men touches only a small part of the animal, and describes what he has learned. The man feeling the leg might say the elephant is like a tree. The one tugging the tail says it's like a snake, and so on. Each man comes to a different, incomplete conclusion based on his limited experience.

(For younger classes, you may want to tell each kid what part they have and ask them to describe it.)

God is infinite -- much much bigger than any elephant. We cannot comprehend Him, so we are like the blind men, each describing part of the elephant. The group of blind men need a whole bunch more blind men to tell them about more parts of the elephant, so that they can work together to understand what the elephant is really like. That's how our Church works -- many people with experience of God, working together and guiding one another, contributing their understanding (and being corrected when it's wrong.)

Jesus had 12 apostles and many disciples -- and sometimes, He had experiences that involved only a few of them (such as the Transfiguration, when he took Peter, James and John up on Mt. Tabor and revealed His glory.) The other apostles and disciples had to rely on those three to tell them about it -- and of course, we only know about it because they told us too.

The church did not and does not limit itself to one view of Jesus' life and ministry. It recognizes four gospels and countless more interpretations: "Each person [reads] in accordance with his capacity, and it is interpreted in accordance with what has been given to him," says Ephraim the Syrian. "If there were [only] one meaning in the words, the first interpreter would find it, and all other [readers] would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding."

We grasp what we can and gain the rest from the witness and memory of the larger community. It's the cumulative insight of the Church that gives us the best picture of God and of Jesus Christ, a picture that reflects not only a diversity of contemporary opinion but those of centuries upon centuries.

That's how God designed it. Our access comes through each other. He wants us to draw close to one another, to live in communion as He does (Holy Trinity) so He designs it this way.

We live and worship God in community because we can't see enough of Him on our own. Christians who isolate themselves from the body, whatever its defects and deficiencies, are consigning themselves to a peculiarly distorted and limited view of God: their own.

**THE LESSON ITSELF:**

Statements Christ Made on the Cross

Pass out the following pages depending on how many groups you have.

Notes:

'Woman, behold your Son' would be nice for the youngest group, as they can learn and sing a hymn to the Theotokos for their presentation.

'I thirst' and 'It is finished' are related to each other and could easily be combined.

*“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” (Luke 23:34)*

Jesus’ first words on the Cross are of forgiveness. The people chanted ‘Crucify Him!’ and He was mocked, scourged, tortured, and nailed to the Cross (take this opportunity to look through the gospel and have participants identify the various indignities and tortures he suffered. You might begin with the betrayal by Judas, and continue through his arrest and beating and crucifixion. See Matthew 27.)

Even so, He asked that God forgive them, because even as they looked upon an innocent man and attacked Him, He knew that humans lack understanding. We know this too, and we are called to forgive as He does, even in the very moment when we are being attacked.

Note that Jesus was very humble and was realistic about our fallen world: He did not expect that people would always recognize Him or respect Him. Likewise, we can follow His example and not expect our lives to be easy or perfect. If we understand that in this fallen world, bad things will happen, it is easier to be forgiving when they do.

In the Lord’s prayer, we pray, *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* We are expected to forgive others if we wish to be forgiven, and Christ is our example.

*“Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)*

On the cross, Jesus is tormented by the Roman soldiers, by various passers-by who mock Him, and then by one of the two robbers who were crucified together beside the Son of God.

“Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23: 39-43)

Many people mock and accuse Jesus, and then a stranger defends Him. The good thief argues back at the bad thief, and then does more: he acknowledges that Jesus is truly the Son of God and asks Him to save Him: “Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom”. (Luke 23:42). This thief is the first person to declare Jesus "Lord" over life and death; even there on the Cross, he knows that Jesus still has His victory ahead of Him, and that His Kingdom is coming after His death. Many of the apostles will walk away broken-hearted thinking that Jesus' death means that he would not rule over His Kingdom (such as Luke and Cleopas who are so disappointed and saddened on their walk to Emmaus) but this good thief understands what they do not yet understand -- he has faith that the Lord's Kingdom is still to come, and asks to be remembered in it. This is why He becomes the first person in Paradise, as Jesus says: "Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise".

Of course, Christ Himself foretold this: "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you" (Matt: 21:31) -- and indeed, a guilty thief would be the first to enter.

When the thief on the Cross reaches out and asks, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into your Kingdom’, Christ generously opens the door to heaven for those who repent of their sins -- even at the last moment of life. Indeed, Christ will soon head to Hades and invite even those evil souls from the days of Noah to join Him in Paradise. There is no sinner He does not wish to save, and His mercy is always boundless.

*When Jesus therefore saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother: "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple: "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26-27)*

The Theotokos and John the Theologian did not scatter or desert the Lord, but stayed close even as He was crucified. Our Lord asked John to take Mary as his mother, and Mary to take John as His son -- for it is His desire that we love one another and care for one another always. Christians are always asked to take care of the widows (as the Theotokos is, with Joseph now dead and her Son gone) and the poor, the orphans and those who need our help.

This is more than just Jesus looking for someone to take care of His mother. This is the very special moment when Jesus, who has adopted us as His brothers and sisters and invited us to call God, 'Our Father', invites us to understand the Theotokos as a Mother to all of us, quick to intercede and to bring joy and peace to us in our sorrow and pain. He is not just talking about John, but about all of the Holy Church: the Theotokos will love us as she loves her own Son, and we will turn to her and love her like we love our own mother.

For your presentation, perhaps you could include a hymn to the Theotokos?

*More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, without corruption you gave birth to God the Word. Truly Theotokos we magnify you!*

*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: "Eli, Eli, lama sabacthani?" Which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46)*

Jesus prays Psalm 21, a Scripture which foretold the very details of the Crucifixion. (The entire Psalm is printed on the last page of this lesson plan.) Taken without the rest of the Psalm, His cry of "Why have You forsaken me?" could be misinterpreted as a cry of despair. Since He took on our nature, Jesus experiences our alienation from God in His humanity, knowing our suffering and distress, yet He does not despair. The Psalm foretells many details that we find fulfilled in the gospel stories of crucifixion, including saying that he feels humiliated, like "A reproach of man and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; They speak with their lips and shake their head, saying, "He hoped in the Lord, let Him rescue him; Let Him save him since He delights in him." People really do walk right by Jesus and say those very things. The Psalm says, "They pierced my hands and my feet" as they did, and "They divided my garments among themselves, And for my clothing they cast lots." The evangelists specifically emphasize when they cast lots for His clothing, noting that the Scriptures (this very Psalm) foretold this. They recognized the Psalm that Jesus is praying here, and they know that the Psalm does not end in despair but in victory: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord; And all families of the Gentiles shall worship before You, For the kingdom is the Lord's; [...] The coming generation shall be told of the Lord, And they will declare His righteousness To a people who will be born, because the Lord made them."

When Jesus cries out this Psalm on the Cross, He reminds us that we are in community and in continuity with the whole Old Testament; what we are seeing here is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, and will deliver the promise of the age to come.



## Psalm 21

1 *For the End; concerning help in the morning; a psalm by David. †*

2 O God, my God, hear me; why have You forsaken me?  
The words of my transgressions are far from my salvation.

3 O my God, I will cry out by day, but You will not hear me;  
And by night, but not for a lack of understanding in me.

4 But You dwell among the saints, O praise of Israel.

5 Our fathers hoped in You; They hoped in You, and You delivered them.

6 They cried out to You and were saved; They hoped in You and were not ashamed.

7 But I am a worm, and not a man; A reproach of man and despised by the people.

8 All who see me mock me; They speak with their lips and shake their head,  
9 Saying, "He hoped in the Lord, let Him rescue him; Let Him save him since He delights in him."

10 For You are He who drew me from the womb, My hope from my mother's breasts;  
11 I was cast upon You from the womb, From my mother's womb You are my God.

12 Do not stand off from me, for affliction is near; There is no one to help.

13 Many young bulls surrounded me; Fat bulls encircled me.

14 They opened their mouths against me Like a raging and roaring lion.

15 I am poured out like water, And all my bones are shattered; My heart is like wax, melting into my stomach.

16 My strength is dried up like an earthen vessel; My tongue cleaves to my throat; And You led me into the dust of death.

17 For many dogs surrounded me; An assembly of evildoers enclosed me; They pierced my hands and my feet.

18 I numbered all my bones, And they look and stare at me.

19 They divided my garments among themselves, And for my clothing they cast lots.

20 But You, O Lord, do not remove Your help from me; Attend to my aid.

21 Deliver my soul from the sword And my only-begotten from the hand of the dog;  
22 Save me from the lion's mouth, My humiliation from the horns of the unicorns.

23 I will declare Your name to my brethren; In the midst of the church I will sing to You.

24 You who fear the Lord, praise Him. All you seed of Jacob, glorify Him; Fear Him, all you seed of Israel.

25 For He has not despised nor scorned the beggar's supplication, Nor has He turned away His face from me; And when I cried out to Him, He heard me.

26 My praise is from You in the great church; I will pay my vows before those who fear Him.

27 The poor shall eat and be well-filled, And those who seek Him will praise the Lord; Their hearts will live unto ages of ages.

28 All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord; And all families of the Gentiles shall worship before You,

29 For the kingdom is the Lord's; And He is the Master of the Gentiles.

30 All the prosperous of the earth ate and worshiped; All going down into the earth shall bow down before Him, And my soul lives with Him.

31 And my seed shall serve Him; The coming generation shall be told of the Lord,  
32 And they will declare His righteousness To a people who will be born, because the Lord made them.

*After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said: "I thirst." (John 19:28)*

This is the only verbal expression of His physical suffering on the cross, and Jesus' thirst reminds us that He suffered a terrible physical thirst in order to heal our own spiritual thirst. He is both expressing real thirst, and prompting the soldiers to fulfill the Scriptures: Psalm 21, which describes the crucifixion refers to His thirst ("my tongue cleaves to my throat", 21:16) and Psalm 70:22 says, "They gave me gall for my food, and they gave me vinegar for my drink."

It would be appropriate to offer the participants to consider how much pain Christ had endured, and how it must have been to have a sponge of gall and vinegar thrust into His mouth as yet another insult and assault -- if you have vinegar, you might pour some onto a sponge and let some of them try it.

Finally, we might consider how Christ offers to heal our spiritual thirst, recalling His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, who asked Him:

"Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." (John 4: 12-15)

*So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said: "It is finished." (John 19:30)*

This does not just mean that Jesus' life on earth is "finished", but indicates that His divine mission, His plan of salvation, is now complete. The prophecies are fulfilled and His work on earth is complete. He did not die or even lose consciousness before He accomplished everything God willed to be accomplished. Still God, He was always in charge, and patiently completed everything before dying.

The sour wine in particular fulfilled the prophecy in Psalms 21 & 70: Psalm 21, which describes the crucifixion, refers to His thirst ("my tongue cleaves to my throat", 21:16) and Psalm 70:22 says, "They gave me gall for my food, and they gave me vinegar for my drink."

"It is finished" refers to the entirety of Christ's mission on earth: He came to take on flesh, to live among us as fully human and fully God, to engage in His ministry from His early preaching in the Temple to His baptism and His miracles and teachings, through to His arrest and crucifixion. He is God, and He has always been in control, and it is He who declares that "It is finished", assuring us that He has completed all that He was meant to complete.

*And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said: "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit." Having said this, He breathed His last. (Luke 23:46)*

Jesus willingly gives up His soul to His Father in Heaven; His life is not taken from Him, but He voluntarily commits it to the Father. His was the first human soul not to be taken to Hades; instead it was freely given into the hands of God. Thus, Christ frees all of humanity from death's grip. Now, Christ enters death in order to destroy it.

We recall how Jesus answered Pontius Pilate when Pilate asked, "Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:10-11). The human beings on this earth, even those who represent the great power of the Roman Empire, "could have no power at all against [Christ]" if God Himself had not willed it. Yes, this crucifixion is the work of human beings who wished to see Jesus destroyed and vanquished, but that is ultimately only possible because it was part of the divine plan for our salvation. Because the Father sent the Son to enter into death, because it is His will, the Son goes willingly to Hades, where He will preach to those who died in the times of Noah and to all human beings throughout history. He will bring them His message of great mercy and love, and then Hades will learn that the immortal God cannot be contained as He breaks open the gates, bestowing life onto those in the tombs. It is because of this great goal, this merciful outreach to His wandering, lost creation that Jesus willingly breathed His last.

## **Gather Back Together:**

- Each group takes a turn to present on the various sayings of Christ on the Cross.
- Have the participants work out the timeline:

1. *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” (Luke 23:34)*

2. *“Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)*

3. *When Jesus therefore saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother: “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple: “Behold your mother!” (John 19:26-27)*

4. *And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” Which means, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46)*

5. *After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said: “I thirst.” (John 19:28)*

6. *So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said: “It is finished.” (John 19:30)*

7. *And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said: “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last. (Luke 23:46)*

## **Conclusion:**

These seven statements speak of:

- forgiveness, which allows us to remain in communion with each other even though we are weak and can offend and harm one another
- our sharing of the Holy Theotokos as all of our mother, and the call to take care of one another when we are weak and need help
- of the continuity of the Scriptures and on the fulfillment of the Scriptures, and thereby of our communion with the Old Testament Prophets and the Old Testament faithful
- Christ joined us in our physical suffering so that He could heal us; we are His Bride, and we are called to be in communion with Him
- Christ willingly enters Hades to free all of humanity from death; His victory belongs to all of us, together -- and we come to understand it together.