

(lively organ music)

- I am one who knows what it is to be punished by God. He drove me deeper and deeper into darkness. I have forgotten what health and peace and happiness are. I do not have much longer to live. My hope in the Lord is gone. The thought of my pain, my homelessness is bitter poison. I think of it constantly and my spirit is depressed, yet hope returns when I remember this one thing, the Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue. The Lord is merciful and will not reject us forever. He may bring us sorrow but his love for us is sure and strong. He takes no pleasure in causing us grief or pain. (lively organ music)

- Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your name. Amen.

- Hear these words of our living Lord. "For God so loved the world "that he gave his only son "that whoever believes in him should not perish "but have eternal life." In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. (congregation mumbling)

- There's a story from France which tells of a boy, who day after day, ran to church during his lunch hour, tiptoed down the central aisle to a front pew, bowed toward the altar, knelt down and for five minutes, gazed at the crucifix. Then he rose, genuflected again, tiptoed out and took to his heels back to his work. One day, the curate, who had watched this boy's daily devotion for some time, stopped him and asked him with interest and administration just what he was doing. The answer was simple and profound: "I look at Jesus, he looks at me, "then I go back to my work." That, in plain essence, is what we shall do. We shall look at Jesus, he will look at us, then we shall go back to our work, remembering him, the man of sorrows who's acquainted with grief, who was wounded for our transgressions, who died to our benefit. Remembering him, we shall wait for Easter when God put his imprimatur on Jesus of Nazareth, raising him from the dead and giving him the name that is above every name, Jesus Christ the Lord. We shall discover that Jesus, in talking to us, his friends today, his disciples today, maybe his enemies today. It will not always be easy for us to listen to him. We may be upset, we may want to close our ears. We may even wish that he had not said what he is reported to have said. A spiritual has warned us of what may happen. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? "Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble." Yet perhaps the only way we can enter into the joy of Easter is to have trembled at the cross on Friday-- on bad Friday, on Friday which is good only in the light of Easter morning. Reading from Luke chapter 23, verses 26, 32 through 34. "And as they led him away, "they seized one Simon of Cyrene "who was coming in from the country "and laid him on the cross "to carry it behind Jesus. "Two others also who were criminals were led away "to be put to death with him. "And when they came to the place "which is called the Skull, there they crucified him "and the

criminals, one on the right "and one on the left. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, "'for they know not what they do.'" Let us look at Jesus. Let us listen to him and let him look at us and let him speak to us as we gather around the cross. Some of us very close to it, some of us at a distance but all within earshot. Let us look honestly. He is not crucified between two candles on an ecclesiastical altar. He is being done to death on a stark wooden cross between two other criminals outside the holy city at a spot called the Place of the Skull. Crucifixion is a cruel form of capital punishment, invented by the Carthaginians and preserved by the Romans as the extreme punishment for criminals of the lowest class and for slaves and rebels. Probably there is but one more cruel death, also Carthaginian. To be staked out on the desert, face up to the sun with the eyelids cut off. Crucifixion was never the last penalty for a citizen of Rome. Paul, a citizen, was beheaded. But tradition has it that Peter was crucified. Like Jesus, he too was an unfranchised Jew. Crucifixion was death by lengthy torture, exposure, exhaustion, pain, shock. According to the church's tradition, Jesus' first words from the cross are, "Father, forgive them, "for they know not what they do." It is hardly what we expect, even from our Lord at such a moment. Do you notice the reason he gives for his intercession? They don't know what they're doing. Ignorance, sheer ignorance. They lack knowledge, especially that depth of understanding which is wisdom. It is interesting that the early church emphasized this want of knowledge as the basic cause of Jesus's death. Listen to Peter: "And now, Brethren, I know that you acted "in ignorance as did also your rulers." Listen to Paul: "For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, "because they did not recognize him, "nor understand the utterances of the prophets, "which are read every Sabbath, "fulfilled these by condemning him." A few moments ago, I said that such a prayer for forgiveness is hardly what we expect, even from our Lord at such a moment. Yet maybe I was wrong. When we think of his teaching and his behavior throughout his ministry, forgiveness ought to be what we expect. Listen to the three verses from the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it was said, "you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy "but I say to you, "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you "so that you may be sons of your Father "who is in Heaven." Forgiveness of an enemy is the mark of spiritual sonship. Isn't Jesus running true to form in the first word? I know it is a hard saying for folks like us. Peter once asked Jesus if seven times were sufficient to forgive a brother, not an enemy, but a brother. Jesus suggested that he raise it to seventy times seven: four hundred and ninety. I suppose Jesus meant that if Peter did it that often, it would become a habit. But to forgive an enemy, even once, that's rough going, ethically, and tough sledding spiritually. But Jesus taught it in his lifetime and died in physical agony still expressing it. The church has never forgotten that. Like the unknown prophet of the exiled Jesus made intercession for the transgressors. Jesus's death is in accord with his life. He died as he lived and he lives in the lives of those who pray his first word after him and because of him and through him. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

- The words of Jesus. "Have mercy upon me, Lord" said by Bach in the "Saint Matthew Passion," recall his agony on Gethsemane. Saint Matthew 26th chapter, verses 36. "Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane "and he said to his disciples, "sit here while I go yonder and pray, "and taking with him Peter "and the two sons of Zebedee, "he began to be sorrowful and troubled. "Then he said to them, "my soul is very sorrowful even to death. "Remain here and watch with me. "And going a little farther, "he fell on his face and prayed. "My Father, if it be possible, "let this cup pass from me. "Nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt. "And he came to the disciples "and found them sleeping "and he said to Peter, "so could you not watch with me one hour? "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. "The Spirit indeed is

willing "but the flesh is weak "and again, for the second time, "he went away and prayed. "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, "thy will be done." (mournful violin music) (singing in foreign language)

- "Now, from the sixth hour, there was darkness "over all the land until the ninth hour "and about the ninth hour, "Jesus cried with a loud voice. (speaking in foreign language) "That is my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These are words of Jesus which one reluctantly examines. For one thing, there is an alarming aspect to it. According to Matthew and Mark, it is the only saying from the cross. For these two evangelists, Jesus's last words were, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The overt terror's enough to frighten the commentator. For another thing, the consternation leads to bewilderment as James Docker points out years ago. "In the entire Bible, "there is no other sentence so difficult to explain. "The first thought of a preacher on coming to it "is to find some excuse for passing it by "and after doing his utmost to expound it, "he must still confess that is quite beyond him." Yet we must examine the excruciating word, it is literally excruciating. (speaking in foreign language) From the cross which being interpreted is exquisitely, acutely and unbearable painful. That this word is genuine, there is little question. It is the one saying remembered in Jesus's native tongue, Aramaic. (speaking in foreign language) My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, deserted me, left me helpless? It is not the kind of dying comment which the church would have invented for its Lord. It was a shock of the hearers that this God-conscious man should be bereft of his divine mainstay. It was a shock for the evangelists, two of them dropped it all together. It is still a shock for interpreters. What did Jesus mean? Let us look together at some possible answers. The simplest interpretation is that it did not mean anything, it was a cry of delirium and therefore cannot be expected to make sense. Or it was a cry of agony, the cross hurt. Jesus's wrecked body gave vent to this tortured, tormented ejaculation and nothing should be read out of it or into it. Yet it would be an act of expository cowardice to leave it at that. A second interpretation has a long theological heritage. These words are a cry of abandoned. God hid his face from Jesus deliberately and of necessity. On the cross, Jesus was the scapegoat bearing the sin and the guilt of all humankind. Since God is of too pure eyes to behold iniquity, he had to avert his gaze from his stricken son who in utter solitude, in awful agony, made the once-for-all atonement for the sins of the whole world. Paul put the matter very simply and definitely. Jesus was made sin for us. He who knew no sin. This explanation has some great names behind it. Augustine and Calvin to mention but two. It has an honored history and a wide acceptance. But despite my deference to tradition, I cannot accept it. It was not this kind of supreme being of whom Jesus taught. A third interpretation swings to the opposite extreme by looking upon the saying as a cry of faith. It points out that, this the first verse of Psalm 22, which is a hymn of faith, ending up with enthusiasm for the God who vindicates the despairing sufferer and reestablishes him in companionship. Verse 24 reads. "For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction "of the afflicted "and he has not hid his face from him "but has heard when he cried to him." This Psalm has a good history of constant use by the writers among the Jews in the midst of adversity, yet I have my doubts about this optimistic explanation. Does a dying man quote? Even if the answer is yes, does he quote verse one when what he wants is verse 24? What are we left with? Let me offer a tentative explanation, remembering James Docker's words already quoted that however one expounds the fourth word, one must still confess that it's still beyond us. A fourth interpretation is that this is a cry of failure and therefore of desolation. It is the spoken ache of one who thought of himself as a deserted man of God. This is the blackout of faith, the dark night of the soul. Jesus had failed in Galilee. He had to flee the country. He had failed in Jerusalem, the authorities had neither accepted his teaching nor recognized his Messiahship.

He had then allowed himself to be arrested, tried and crucified without any defense, believing the issue was in God's hands. This word is a cry of abandonment, the important pathos of which we cannot really grasp because none of us has even known a similar friendship with God. The ministry of Jesus was no saunter down a country lane amid the lilies of the field but rather a fight to the death with real forces of evil. It was a risky, desperate business in which he saw himself winning countless skirmishes yet never certain he was victor in the war. When we realize that, then it is not blasphemous and it may not be presumptuous for us to consider, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" as a cry of failure and of desolation. It says that at least once a year, it is good for us post-resurrection Christians to stand on the other side, the bad Friday side of Easter. We subsequently know that God has not forsaken Jesus. The resurrection was the mighty proof of this. That is why we worship today. God vindicated Jesus but what did "My God, my God, "why hast thou forsaken me" mean to Jesus and to those who heard him when he spoke the words on a Friday afternoon outside a city wall? They tell us that the incarnation, the enfleshment was actual, genuine, authentic, down to Earth. Our Lord was a mere man and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross betrayed, deserted, doubting, desolate. ♪ Every time ♪ ♪ I think about Jesus ♪ ♪ Every time ♪ ♪ I think about Jesus ♪ ♪ Every time ♪ ♪ I think about Jesus ♪ ♪ Surely he died on Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Surely he died on Calvary ♪ ♪ Make me trouble ♪ ♪ Thinking 'bout dying ♪ ♪ Make me trouble ♪ ♪ Thinking 'bout dying ♪ ♪ Make me trouble ♪ ♪ Thinking 'bout dying ♪ ♪ Surely he died on Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Calvary ♪ ♪ Surely he died ♪ ♪ On Calvary ♪

- The third reading is taken from the Gospel according to Luke, the 23rd chapter verses 44 through 46. "It was now about the sixth hour "and there was darkness over the whole land "until the ninth hour "while the son's light failed "and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. "Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit, "and having said this, he breathed his last." For most of us, it is finished would seem to be a final word, the last word. Whatever Jesus' earthly job was, it was done. Anything else said would run the risk of being an anticlimax, unimportant, undignified, even ridiculous but our Lord has one more thing to say, one more thing to do. He says it. In saying it, he does it. He is speaking for the last time in the days of his flesh. What will he say? Listen. "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Has Jesus returned to his mother's knee in memory? Is he remembering a Psalm which Mary taught him as a boyhood prayer, Psalm 31? Here are the first five verses. "In thee, oh Lord, do I seek refuge. "Let me never be put to shame. "In thy righteousness, deliver me. "Incline thy ear to me, "rescue me speedily. "Be thou a rock of refuge for me, "a strong fortress to save me. "Yea, thy art my rock and my fortress. "For thy name's sake, lead me and guide me. "Take me out of the net "which is hidden from me "for thou art my refuge. "Into thy hand I commit my spirit. "Thou hast redeemed me, oh Lord, faithful God." This is a prayer of trust and confidence. Maybe it reminds us of a prayer which we learned as children, which we still sometimes pray as adults when we are tired and weary and have not the words or the time or the energy to say anything else. This night I lay me down to sleep. I pray, thee Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray, thee Lord, my soul to take. Yet there was a difference in Jesus' situation and in the Psalmist's. The Psalmist was asking for deliverance from physical death. Jesus was asking for acceptance in physical death. Jesus was looking beyond this earthly life. It was almost over. He was entrusting his spirit to the care of God. (speaking in foreign language) These last words have been referred to as a proclamation of victory. I hardly think so. Victory is postponed until Easter. It is rather a proclamation of assurance. Jesus has rallied from the despair

of "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" and from the distress of I thirst. The final word is spoken from strength, rather than from weakness, from confidence, rather than from bewilderment. From peace rather than turmoil. He has done all he could on Earth for God. It is finished. Now he gives himself over to the care of God, to the Father with whom he had always been in contact. It is good to know that our Lord died in confident trust. What will our last words be? If we are *compos mentis*, won't they be in line with the tenor of our lives? That has been true of many others. When Mary I of England, Bloody Mary, lay dying in 1558, all she could think of was that Calais, the last English possession in France had been lost during her reign. Her last recorded words were, "When I am dead and open, "you shall find Calais lying upon my heart." In 1931, the dying Anna Pavlova recalled her greatest triumph as a ballerina and cried as her last words, "Get my swan costume ready." Where a person's treasure is, there will his heart be also. Where is our treasure? Where is our heart? What would our last words tell? The amazing thing about Jesus' last word was that it was not said on Calvary once and for all, never to be repeated, it was taken up and reiterated with confidence by his followers so that it echos again and again down the centuries right into this year of grace. "Into thy hands, I commend my spirit" were the last words of Peter, martyr and saint and of Charlemagne, the emperor and probably of John Hus at the stake and of Melanchthon, the reformer. They were the dying affirmation of Christopher Columbus in a wretched hired lodging in Spain and of Lady Jane Grey on a scaffold in the Tower of London. Mary, Queen of Scots and John Knox, bitter political and religious enemies, both turned to God in their final hours with the last words of the Lord whom they served so faithfully but so differently. Time would fail me to tell of the others, heroes and vagabonds of the faith, men and women of the church. Unknown to us or well-known to us, of every generation and ours, who died in confidence, confidence not of trumpets sounding on the other side, but of one who would receive their spirits as he had received his own son. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." It is the right note on which our Lord crossed the Jordan. It is the right note on which to close a Good Friday vigil because it leaves the whole matter with God. Let us pray. Almighty and eternal God, creator of our lives and guide of these our pilgrim days, grant each one of us the confidence and faith of thy son that our last thoughts and words may be, Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit. Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, amen. (tranquil organ music) (congregation singing)

- Let us pray. For this world which is sighing and groaning for redemption, for the whole of suffering humankind in the present age, for all those who are the victims of war and racial conflict, for those who are overwhelmed by natural disasters, for all who meet with any kind of accident, for those who are in any kind of danger, let us pray. Lord God, you want the well-being of and not their destruction. Take all violence from our midst. Extinguish hatred in our hearts. Curb the passion in us that makes us seek other's lives. Give peace to all on Earth. We ask you this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us pray for those who are deprived and live in poverty, for all who are despairing and feel themselves to be beyond help. For all whose minds are disturbed or who are mentally ill. For those who suffer physically for years and whose bodies are gradually broken down. Let us pray for all who must die alone without the hope of life after death and without faith in the resurrection of their bodies. Lord God, you have made us mortal and we must die. Do not, we beseech you, take our lives away forever, you who are a God of the living. We ask you this for Jesus's sake today and every day forever and forever. Let us pray for all those who are in great difficulty, for those who have lost their faith in man and love, their faith in God, for those who seek truth but cannot find it. Let us pray for all married people who have drifted apart from each other and for all priests who have broken

down under the strain of their office. Lord God, you are the comfort of the sorrowful and the strength of the tortured. Hear the prayers of all people in distress and all who appeal to your mercy so that they may recognize with joy that you have helped them in every ordeal through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us pray for the place in which we live and work, for all the people in it who are lonely, for those whose voices are never heard and those who find no friends. Let us pray for the homeless and those without shelter and for all who are disheartened and feel that they have been betrayed. Lord God, you have given us a place to live in, space to build in and people to live with. Open our eyes to each other. Make us humble enough to help other people and comfort them, so that a little of your love may be seen in this place through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us ask the Lord our God for forgiveness for the suffering that we cause to others, for our forgetfulness and neglect of others, for our lack of understanding for each other, for ill speaking of other people and for bitterness and spite we so often feel against our neighbors for not being able to forgive. Let us pray for forgiveness of all the sins that we and our helplessness commit against each other. Lord God, we pray for the sake of Jesus in whom everything is consummated, let us enter into your peace. Amen. ♪ They crucified our Lord ♪ ♪ And he never said a mumblin' word ♪ ♪ He bowed his head ♪ ♪ And died ♪ ♪ And he never said a mumblin' word ♪ ♪ Not a word ♪ ♪ Not a word ♪ ♪ Not a word ♪