

THE LAST WORDS

by Ronald D. Vaughan



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The Last Words

A Tenebrae drama based on
the seven words from the cross

by
Ronald D. Vaughan

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

JOHN, THE APOSTLE

SIMON OF CYRENE

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

CAIAPHAS, THE HIGH PRIEST

THE CENTURION

PRODUCTION NOTES

SET

This drama may be presented with a minimum of scenery. The focal point of the stage is a large wooden cross. In the original presentation of this drama, we constructed a large wooden cross out of 6" x 6" timbers and supported it with a wooden "hill" made out of 2" x 4" boards covered with plywood. The hill occupied the center third of the platform, leaving a flat area on each side of the cross on which the characters could stand and speak. We covered the hill and platform area with a light brown fabric to create the sense of barren ground. A purple curtain behind the cross gives a very regal effect to the scene and covers the choir loft area. A crown of thorns may be placed at the head of the cross. A table should be placed beside the cross to hold the candles.

COSTUMING

A Bible encyclopedia or a book about the customs and dress of the biblical era can give you pictures of the kind of clothing these characters might have worn. *Costuming the Christmas and Easter Play* by Alice M. Staeheli (copyright © 1988 by Meriwether Publishing Ltd.) is one such book. Call 1-800-93PLAYS to order.

The Woman Caught in Adultery: Though her life had been changed by her encounter with Jesus, her costume is colorful and bright.

Joseph of Arimathea: Dressed as a Pharisee, a garnet tunic with a black outer robe. The headdress is black with a small white border along the front edge.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus: Because Mary's part is such a dark expression of her grief, her costume is dark and gray.

John, the Apostle: John is in a simple tunic with a cape of contrasting color. He should appear to be a simple fisherman, in contrast to some of the more wealthy and influential characters.

Simon of Cyrene: Simon's costume is similar to John's style and social standing, but his is dirty from carrying the cross. Make his hands, face and hair appear unkempt to reflect his

struggle to carry the cross of Jesus.

The Woman at the Well: Like the woman caught in adultery, her costume is colorful to reflect her past life.

Caiaphas, the High Priest: The high priest is dressed in black with a black headdress. His appearance should express authority and power.

The Centurion: The centurion is dressed in a red tunic with a leather breastplate and a bronze-colored helmet. A costume supply company can help you with the helmet. Because the tunic is shorter, sandals with straps which reach up the calf work well.

BLOCKING

The Narrator should speak from a balcony or other area out of sight of the audience. The Choir should sing from a balcony or other area out of sight of the audience. Characters speak one at a time and are on the stage alone. The only exception to this is when John joins Mary and speaks to her. Characters can enter from the lobby of the sanctuary and walk down the aisles to the platform. Their entrance should be carefully timed so that they arrive just before the preceding music ends. Have the characters enter from alternate sides of the cross. (For example, the first character enters from the right side of the cross, the second character from the left, etc.) The exception, again, is that John will join Mary on the same side of the cross. When the characters have completed their parts, have them remain in position, gazing at the cross, until the next musical selection has begun. This will give the audience time to reflect upon the meaning of the monolog they have heard. The Centurion does not leave the platform at the conclusion of his part. He stands gazing at the cross and is joined by the other members of the cast. Near the end of the final anthem, the Centurion kneels at the foot of the cross. Other characters kneel one at a time except for Caiaphas, who turns away from the cross. When the final anthem is completed, the characters may quickly and silently exit the sanctuary during the closing prayer. This will leave the audience with the scene of the cross and lit Christ candle with no characters.

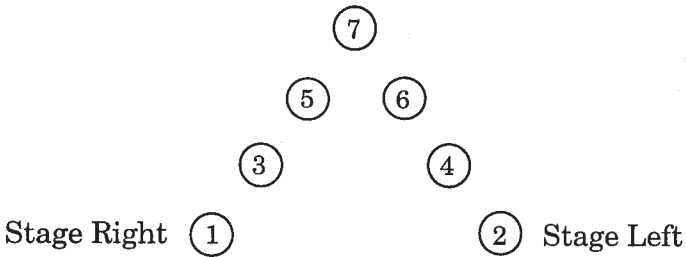
LIGHTING

The tone of the service is a dark one, which should be reflected in the lighting. Minimal platform lighting will also emphasize the growing darkness as the candles are snuffed out, one by one. A spotlight, if available, may be used to focus upon each character

as he/she speaks. A second spotlight may be kept on the cross at all times to keep it central to the story.

PROPS

The only props needed are a candle snuffer and seven candles — six dark tapers and one larger white Christ candle. They should be arranged in an inverted V, with the large white candle in the middle.



SUGGESTED MUSIC SOURCES

Following is a list of the anthems used in the original production with the composer, publisher, and catalog order number included:

1. "Come and Mourn," (Anna Laura Page), Alfred Publishing, #7908.
2. "Forgiven," (Red), Genevox, #4170-12.
3. "It Was for You," (Wyrzten), Benson, #ZJP8242.
4. "A Wind Blew Over Calvary," (Sewell), Triune Choral Library, #10/1090.
5. "This Is Love," (Schrader), Hope Publishing Company, #GC 940.
6. "Pavonne," (Klouse), Hinshaw Music Inc., #HMC-1091.
7. "Jesus, in Thy Thirst and Pain," (Wood), from *A Service of Darkness*, Harold Flammer Music (Shawnee Press), #A5005.
8. "Worthy Is the Lamb," (Wyrzten), Benson, #ZJP - 5050.
9. "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," (Maker). This hymn may be found in most Protestant hymnals.

6 MUSIC: “Come and Mourn”—*Adult Choir.*

9
10 **NARRATOR:** Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not
11 know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34a) (*The WOMAN*
12 *CAUGHT IN ADULTERY* enters Stage Right and extinguishes
13 candle 1, then stands Center Stage.)

24 We were well on our journey toward my death when I
25 overheard part of a conversation. The people said
26 something about a teacher, something about a trick,
27 something about a chance to catch him in his words. This
28 idea seemed to please the group very much. The mob
29 suddenly changed direction and took me to the temple
30 courts. When they found the man they were looking for,
31 they stopped and slung me in front of him. I will never
32 forget what they said. "Teacher, this woman was caught in
33 the act of adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to
34 stone such women. Now what do you say?" (John 8:4-5) They
35 waited to see if he would join them in stoning me for my

1 my sin. I felt every condemning eye burning a hole of
 2 judgment through me as we awaited his answer. I knew
 3 that if he agreed to condemn me, his answer would be the
 4 last straw. His answer would bring the first stone. He bent
 5 down and wrote on the ground with his finger. The angry
 6 mob questioned him relentlessly, wanting to know his
 7 answer for my sin. He stood and gave his answer: "If any
 8 one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a
 9 stone at her." (John 8:7) Again, he stooped down and wrote
 10 upon the ground. There was a long silence, and then I
 11 heard a sound — the sound of a shower of rocks. I looked
 12 up in fear, believing that my moment of death was at hand.
 13 But these rocks were not being thrown at me. They were
 14 dropping to the street from the hands of men who realized
 15 that condemnation was not God's solution for my sin. One
 16 by one, beginning with the oldest, they walked away and
 17 left me with Jesus. He stood and asked me, "Woman, where
 18 are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," I said.
 19 "Then neither do I condemn you," he said. "Go now and
 20 leave your life of sin" (John 8:10, 11)

21 His solution for my sin was not to stone me, not to
 22 condemn me, but to forgive me. He called me to leave my
 23 life of sin, and I did. His grace was the beginning of a new
 24 life for me.

25 Now, upon this cross, he offers this forgiveness to all. He
 26 has done no wrong. The Romans and his own people have
 27 condemned him to die. He has every reason to condemn us
 28 all. But he hasn't. Did you hear him? He prays to God that
 29 we might be forgiven for what we have done to him. His
 30 way is not to condemn, but to forgive. So few have heard
 31 him. So few seem to trust him. But every sinner who
 32 believes him will receive what I received that day:
 33 forgiveness to leave the sins of the past behind —
 34 forgiveness to start a new life. (*She exits Stage Right.*)

35 **MUSIC:** "Forgiven" — Adult Choir.

THE SECOND WORD

NARRATOR: Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Matthew 27:38; Luke 23:39-43) (*JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA enters Stage Left and extinguishes candle 2, then stands Center Stage.*)

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA: I saw Jesus carry the heavy weight of his cross to this terrible place. As I followed him, I, too, carried a heavy burden — the burden of failure and shame. I am Joseph of Arimathea. I have known Jesus for quite a while. I have heard the truth of God in his words. I have seen the power of God in his deeds. I have felt the purpose of God at work in his life. I believed long ago that Jesus is our Messiah, the deliverer of our people, our hope for the future. But...I've kept my faith a secret. I've done nothing to help him. Oh, I've had my chances. Even last night, when Jesus was brought before the Council for that mock trial, I could have stood up for him. I could have spoken up on his behalf. I might have changed their minds and saved his life. But I didn't. I did nothing because I was afraid. I was afraid of being rejected by the members of the Council — of losing my place of power in the community — of losing my life, as Jesus is losing his. I've tried to follow him secretly. But now, as he hangs upon that cross, I see that following him secretly isn't following him at all.

I was ready to walk away a complete failure until I heard his words a moment ago. He hangs between two

thieves — two men who have sinned again and again by stealing. One thief had the audacity to taunt Jesus along with this cruel crowd. But the other one asked Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. I heard this and thought, “You miserable wretch. It’s too late for you, just as it’s too late for me. You’ve wasted your life, now your life is over.” But Jesus did not see him that way. Did you hear what he said to that thief? “...today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 29:43) Could it be that it is not too late for this thief? Could it be that no matter how many yesterdays he has wasted, what matters most is today? He has received the promise of paradise because he seized today and trusted in Jesus. The Master has said that it is not too late for this thief — perhaps it is not too late for me. I could’ve helped him a hundred times, but I have hidden my faith in fear. But maybe even now there is something loving I can do for him, some deed through which I can show my faith in him, my love for him, my devotion to him. Like this thief, I have wasted so many yesterdays. But what is true for this thief must be true for me: what matters most is today. I can be faithful today. I can stand by him today. I can receive the promise of paradise today.

(He exits Stage Left.)

MUSIC: “It Was for You” — *Adult Choir.*

THE THIRD WORD

NARRATOR: When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:26, 27) (*MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS enters Stage Right and extinguishes candle 3, then stands Center Stage.*)

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS: How can I give up my son?

How can I bear to watch him die? Long ago, Joseph was taken from me in death. And now my son, Jesus, is dying like this. In one sense, he has always belonged to me. I gave birth to him. Joseph and I raised him in our home. He worked in the carpenter's shop. But in a deeper sense, he has never really belonged to us. From the very start, he has belonged to God.

I remember when Jesus was eight days old. We took him to the temple to dedicate him to the Lord as the law commands. An old man named Simeon was there. He told us that Jesus would bring salvation to his people, and even to the Gentiles. We marveled at what he said. But Simeon also said something else. He said:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34, 35)

Those words have come true today. My son has been spoken against by the religious and political leaders. These last hours have shown how much fear and hatred live in the hearts of those who claim to lead the people of God — their hearts *have* been revealed. And a sword has pierced my soul today — the pain of seeing my son, Jesus, suffering and dying upon this cross.

MUSIC: "A Wind Blew Over Calvary" — *Adult Choir*.

(JOHN, THE APOSTLE enters Stage Right and stands by MARY.)

JOHN, THE APOSTLE: Mary, did you hear what he just said? He called us to be family to each other. Don't you remember that day when you and your other sons came to take Jesus home, away from the crowds and the conflict and the people who claimed that he was crazy? Do you remember the question he asked? "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my

brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:48-50) I wasn’t so sure what he meant by those words when he spoke them. But I believe that I understand them now.

There is a love which is stronger than the love of a human family — a love which is even stronger than the love a mother has for a child or a son has for his mother. One day, when he was teaching us, he described the greatest kind of love. He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Mary, we are seeing that love today. He is laying down his life for us. And because he loves us so much, he wants us to love each other. Mary, he has called us to be family to each other. He wants you to be like a mother to me. And he wants me to be like your son. We will do what he has told us to do. We will be his people. We will love each other. We will be faithful to everyone who does the will of God. Come, Mary, and share my home. His love has made us a family — the family of God. (*JOHN puts his arm around MARY and they exit Stage Right.*)

MUSIC: “This Is Love” — *Adult Choir.*

THE FOURTH WORD

NARRATOR: And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” — which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) (*SIMON OF CYRENE enters Stage Left and extinguishes candle 4, then stands Center Stage.*)

SIMON OF CYRENE: I came to Jerusalem for Passover. I was minding my own business when I heard the noise of a crowd in the street. I pushed through the crowd to see what was happening and saw a most horrible sight. The Romans were leading this poor man through the streets, mocking him as they went; making him a public example for anyone who lost the favor of Rome. They were leading

1 him out of the city to crucify him, but they had almost
2 killed him already. His back was bleeding and torn open —
3 the work of the cruel Roman whip, I was sure. He
4 staggered and stumbled beneath the weight of the heavy
5 cross he bore. He fell, but the guards struck him and yelled
6 at him to get up and go on. But he couldn't go far. He fell
7 again, and this time even they knew that he wouldn't bear
8 the burden of the cross alone.

9 The guards looked around for someone to help him. I
10 waited to see if a friend of his would step forward to help
11 him, but no one did. A guard, in great frustration, picked
12 me out of the crowd, and ordered me to pick up the man's
13 cross and carry it for him to the place of execution. I had
14 no choice but to obey. Still, I resented having to carry a
15 cross for anyone. It was heavy and dirty and bloody. I
16 thought to myself that I must have been in the wrong place
17 at the wrong time.

18 As I followed along behind this man, Jesus, I realized
19 that though I had taken a heavy load from his shoulders,
20 he still bore a heavy load which no one could take away. I
21 have never seen a man so all alone. I had heard that this
22 man once had a large following. Thousands came to hear
23 him speak and to see the great things he did for God. Large
24 crowds wanted to make him their king. But where did they
25 go? Not one of them was there to help him bear his cross. I
26 know that he had a circle of disciples who had traveled
27 with him and learned from him for a long time. They were
28 closer to him than anyone. But they too were gone now. His
29 mother and some other women followed us through the
30 streets, but not one of his disciples was there to help him
31 bear his load. As I, a total stranger, followed him outside
32 the city and laid down the cross upon which he would be
33 killed, I thought that this man was as alone as a man had
34 ever been. Somehow I couldn't leave him. I had to stay. I
35 had to stand by him, at least at a distance. No one should

1 die so all alone.

2 As I stood near his cross, I asked one of our religious
3 leaders, one of the members of the Sanhedrin, what this
4 man's crime had been. What had he done to deserve such a
5 death? The man answered that this Jesus had made a
6 blasphemous claim that he and the Father are one. As I
7 thought about what Jesus had claimed and whether I
8 could believe it was true, I heard him cry out in an agony
9 which ran deeper than the nails which held him to the
10 cross. He said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken
11 me?"

12 How awful, I thought. At one time he felt that he was one
13 with God. And now he feels so alone that even God has
14 turned away from him. What could have come between
15 them? I don't know. But I will never forget how he looked
16 and how he sounded. He's carrying much more than a
17 cross today. He looks like a man who is carrying the whole
18 world. *(He exits Stage Left.)*

19 **MUSIC:** "Pavonne" — *Adult Choir.*

20 THE FIFTH WORD

23 **NARRATOR:** Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so
24 that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am
25 thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a
26 sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant,
27 and lifted it to Jesus' lips. (John 19:28, 29) *(The WOMAN AT*
28 *THE WELL enters Stage Right and extinguishes candle 5.)*

29 **WOMAN AT THE WELL:** This man is so thirsty. He's lost a great
30 deal of blood. He's been driven through the streets like an
31 animal. He's hung on that cross for hours. At least these
32 Romans have the decency to give him a moment of relief
33 from his thirst.

34 That is what he did for me. I met Jesus when I was very
35 thirsty. I had come to the well to draw water in the middle



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