

Letters to a Young Episcopalian

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

[View All](#)

January 25, 2015: [Doubt](#)
February 1, 2015: [Imagination](#)
February 8, 2015: [Authority](#)
February 15, 2015: [Redemption](#)
February 22, 2015: [Spirituality](#)
March 1, 2015: [Creation](#)
March 8, 2015: [Witness](#)
March 15, 2015: [Patience](#)
March 22, 2015: [Responsibility](#)
March 29, 2015: [Judgment](#)
April 5, 2015: [Resurrection](#)
April 19, 2015: [Confession](#)
April 26, 2015: [Altruism](#)
May 3, 2015: [Evil](#)
May 10, 2015: [Violence](#)
May 17, 2015: [Baptism](#)
May 24, 2015: [Eucharist](#)
May 31, 2015: [Prayer](#)
December 20, 2015: [Fear](#)
December 27, 2015: [The Scapegoat](#)
January 10, 2016: [Gratitude](#)
January 17, 2016: [Epiphany](#)
January 24, 2016: [Story](#)
January 31, 2016: [Grace](#)
February 7, 2016: [Vocation](#)
February 14, 2016: [St. Valentine](#)
February 21, 2016: [Lent](#)
February 28, 2016: [#blessed](#)
March 6, 2016: [Relationship](#)
March 13, 2016: [Help](#)
March 20, 2016: [Respect](#)
March 27, 2016: [Foot Washing](#)
April 17, 2016: [Failure](#)
May 1, 2016: [Place](#)
May 15, 2016: [Ascension](#)
May 29, 2016: [The Trinity](#)
September 10, 2017: [Education](#)
September 24, 2017: [Assumptions](#)
October 8, 2017: [Mysticism](#)
October 22, 2017: [Science](#)
November 5, 2017: [Communion](#)
November 19, 2017: [Thin Places](#)
December 17, 2017: [Advent](#)

January 14, 2018: [Revelation](#)
February 4, 2018: [Goose-Feathers](#)
April 12, 2020: [Centering Prayer](#)
April 19, 2020: [Becoming](#)
April 26, 2020: [Self-observation](#)
May 3, 2020: [The Kingdom of Heaven](#)
May 10, 2020: [Soul](#)
May 24, 2020: [Love](#)
May 31, 2020: [Pentecost](#)
June 7, 2020: [Heartbreaking](#)
June 14, 2020: [Dignity](#)

Dear Anna,

Do you remember the last words of Jesus?

The Gospels record seven phrases, traditionally called words, that were uttered by Jesus during his crucifixion.

I recently heard a powerful new musical composition by a young composer named Joel Thompson. It's titled [The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed](#). Thompson published it while he was the Upper School Chorus Director at Holy Innocents Episcopal School in Atlanta.

Thompson uses the last words of seven unarmed black men who have recently been killed by police or other authorities. For example, the traditional third word of Jesus is, "Mother, this is your son. Son, this is your mother." Thompson builds the third movement around the last words of Amadou Diallo, a young African immigrant who in 1999 was shot 41 times by NYC police officers who mistook him for a serial rapist. He had just phoned his mother to tell her that he was going to college.

Thompson said that he was trying to create space for empathy. He does that by connecting us to a struggle that we might not feel is our own. Trayvon Martin asked the neighborhood watch volunteer who ultimately killed him, "what are you following me for?" I couldn't listen to those words without getting a sense of what it feels like to be followed.

But, to be clear, Thompson's work goes beyond politics. There is anger in it, but it's not about anger. You don't have to agree with any particular view of who is to blame for what happened to these men to feel the pain of their deaths. You just have to let the music speak to you about how their lives mattered

Just listening to the music feels like a spiritual practice. You might think of it as practicing "ubuntu" – an African term meaning humanity that is often translated as "I am because we are." As one student who performed the piece in Boston said, "we listened to each other, and we grew together through song."

Restoring dignity lost starts with listening, I think.

Your affectionate uncle,

Ames