

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## I Lay Down My Life

In the seven verses of today's Gospel Jesus uses this phrase five times; I think we owe it to him to ask what he meant. For this I need to look at the Greek words, and try to imagine the Aramaic words Jesus might have spoken, which these represent.

### A Special Usage

The word *tithemi* - "put/lay/set down"- which Jesus uses in this passage is utterly common, one of the most basic of words. It means something entirely physical, like *putting something down* in a particular place, even very solemnly (like a *foundation-stone* in a building), *putting money in* the bank or paying your taxes; in war, *making camp*, *laying down* your arms; in sport it means *putting up* a prize, and in religion it is used for *offering* a sacrifice in a temple. There is also a more complex, deeper meaning, like the *founding* of a house, the *conceiving* of a child (literally, *putting under the girdle*) or *holding* a wedding: a government's *laying down* laws, or a god *decreeing* divine principles. *Putting forward* an idea is another usage (our word *thesis* comes from this). Finally it is used for *appointing* someone to a post. John's Gospel is unique in its use of the phrase "laying down your life"; but you can see that there is a rich field of reference in all the meanings outlined above.

### Not "Discarding"!

One thing Jesus doesn't appear to mean is *dropping your life and walking away*. Discarding one's life is not a Christian concept. This is very important; I'm sure some people don't appreciate this. I often hear young men who are considering the priesthood being told that they would be "throwing their lives away", for instance: even by their own, Catholic, families (do you need to ask why we're short of priests?). The note suggested by this word is one of *commitment*. So the message of the Gospel today is that the key quality for the Shepherd is commitment. Something more: the word is used, not just for the action of Jesus, but for God's action too. God *puts beneath his feet* all the enemies of Christ, and where God puts you, you stay put. Jesus himself is *set* at the right hand of the Father in his Ascension; so

the *re-arrangement* of the cosmos which happens in the Paschal Mystery is God's work: literally, he *resets* his Universe in a new order. In the process, God himself determines where the members of Christ's body should each find their place: this gives us our theology of vocation, where each of us is not only *called* by God, but *established* by God when we have answered. It's in the name of this new world that Jesus lays down his life like a foundation-stone, saying: *Your will be done*.

### Into Your Hands

We can easily see, now, why St Luke alters the last words of Jesus from the ones used by Mark. *Into your hands I commend my spirit* sounds more like someone purposefully investing his all, than does the anguished cry of *Eloi, Eloi*. In fact, because both cries are verses from the Psalms, there is not the slightest contradiction between them; but Luke clearly wished to express the reality of Jesus' trust as he died.

### Here Is The Place Where They Laid Him

There is our word again: we *laid him down* in the tomb. As we did that, we had little thought of his eternal destiny: as the old *Stations* put it, *All came sorrowfully away*. But contrast that with his own triumphant words: *No-one takes my life from me: I lay it down of my own accord; and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again; and this is the command I have received from my Father*. The word "command" here is very special; John writes in his first letter that the one command of Christ is the command to love. Jesus says of this command: *I know that it means eternal life* (Jn 12: 49). In this spirit of loving obedience, he lays down his life.  
*Fr Philip*