

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 20, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 19:28 & PSALM 69:21

“Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed; and in order to make the Scripture come true, He said, ‘I am thirsty.’” (Today’s English Version)

“...for My awful thirst they gave Me vinegar.”

(Living Bible)

THE FIFTH WORD FROM THE CROSS **The Word of Suffering**

It is interesting to note that six of the seven last words fall into two groups of three each:

1. There are three that concern Jesus and other people.
 - a. “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” — A prayer for His murderers.
 - b. “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” — The word of pardon and assurance to the penitent guerilla fighter on the cross beside Him.
 - c. “Woman, here is your son; son, here is your mother.” — Spoken to His mother and the beloved disciple, John.

2. There are three that center upon Christ the Son in relationship to God the Father.
 - a. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” — As He consciously bore the sins of His people, and thus felt shut of f from the presence of His Father.
 - b. “It is finished.” — The shout of triumph as He realized that He had purchased redemption for those who would believe in Him; and finally,
 - c. “Father, into your hands I commit My spirit.” Part of the evening Jewish prayer which He had learned at His mother’s knee years before; akin to our,
“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep...”

But there remains one other word that is traditionally put in fifth place — “I am thirsty.” It is not concerned with our Lord’s relationship with others or with God. The relationship is now Christ with Himself — Christ with His own body.

A little boy came and knocked at a door, and said to the man who answered, “I hear you have some puppies for sale.” “Yes, indeed,” said the man. “Would you like to see them?” “I would like to buy one if it doesn’t cost too much.” “Well, son, they are ten dollars.” You could see the disappointment on the youngster’s face. “I have only \$1.67, but could I look at them anyhow?” The man whistled, and the mother dog trotted out with five little balls of fur rolling along behind her. The boy caught his breath, then said anxiously, “I heard there was one with a bad leg.” “Yes,” said the man, “I’m afraid she is hopelessly lame.” “That is the one I want,” said

the boy. “Couldn’t I pay for her a little at a time?” “But wouldn’t you rather have one that can play with you? That puppy will never walk right.” And for an answer the boy pulled up his pants leg and showed an iron brace. “I don’t walk so good either,” he said. “I reckon that puppy will need some understanding till she gets used to her bad leg. I did.”

The suffering of our world needs some understanding. Does God care? Does He understand when we suffer? This word from the Cross is our answer.

There are those who doubt and even deny the testimony of Scripture as to the deity of our Lord. They refuse to accept the witness of the prophets and the apostles who declare with one voice that He is equal with God. Such unbelief is surely displeasing to the Father.

However, in reaction to those who do not accept the deity of our Lord, there are others who have so stressed His equality with God as to forget His kinship with us. Jesus Christ was God entering fully into our human condition and drinking our cup of suffering to the bitter dregs. God was not like some wealthy visitor from the right side of the tracks who schedules a brief tour through the slums to distribute Christmas baskets. He made His home in the slums and endured everything: The inadequate food, the dirt, the bugs, the daily humiliations that the poor suffer. This is part of what was implied when Jesus said, “I’m thirsty.” It was the sign and seal of a genuine incarnation. This Jesus Christ is very God become very Man!

Though the earth and sea and sky were created by Him; though He gave Israel water from the rock in the wilderness; yet now He knows the knife-thrust of thirst that stabs inside His throat when His mouth is parched, and He tries to swallow. He turned water into wine at Cana of Galilee, but now He suffers a burning thirst on the hill of Calvary. Even a little water could ease that fierce cutting pain — a mere trickle squeezed out of a sponge! You remember the rich man in torment who begged for someone just to dip the tip of a finger in water and come and cool his tongue (Luke 16:19-31). To that everlasting thirst we would have been condemned had not Jesus suffered that agony for us; for there, on the Cross, His tongue had been parched by the very fires of hell!

Can you imagine the dehydrated thirst of One Who has been bleeding slowly for six hours; the suffering of One Who has already had an agony of sweat poured out of Him; the scorching noonday sun; and lips that have long been parched dry, and a tongue like leather?

Have you noticed that Jesus was offered drink twice on the hill of Calvary? It was a custom amongst certain wealthy and charitable ladies of Jerusalem to provide a drug for the poor wretches condemned to be crucified. It was a mixture of wine and certain narcotics, to dull the terrible pain, and to act as a crude anaesthetic. When Jesus reached the place of execution, the kindly ladies were already there, and stepping forward, they offered Him the cup which had been prepared for Him. But no sooner had He tasted it than He realized what it was, and very graciously but very deliberately He declined it. Why did He do that? Because He knew that the drinking of that drug would have marred the crowning work of His life. When a man is facing a great task, he does not drug his faculties with dope. Does the fighter pilot do that before taking to the air to engage the enemy? Jesus knew that the cross was His crowning work — the work that would enable poor sinful humanity to call Him Savior.

He refused that cup also because He wanted to be a Savior Who could help us when we face our Calvary experiences. No matter how much we suffer, we can always say, “He suffered more for me!” It is significant to note that the Greek verb rendered “thirst” was used in medical reports in connection with a high fever. The mounting fever which accompanied our Lord’s suffering made His thirst well—nigh unbearable.

Remember that when Jesus uttered the words, “I’m thirsty,” He was within seconds of His death. That is what gives point to the words of our text, “Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed; and in order to make the Scripture come true, He said, I’m thirsty.” “At this precise moment, when He knew that He was about to draw His last breath, He knew also that in some mysterious yet glorious way, He had borne the sins of His people upon His own spotless soul. That sin had shut Him off from the very face of His Father, because God cannot look upon sin. But our Lord also knew that He had fully satisfied the demands of a just and holy God. He had perfectly revealed the boundless love of God, and now “the strife was o’er, the battle done” — He had conquered sin and death! The work of redemption was now completed; and I am convinced that in His awful thirst He called for the un-drugged sour wine so that He would be able clearly to articulate the final word of triumph — “It is finished!”

Let us examine our text even further. “Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed; and in order to make the Scripture come true, He said, ‘I’m thirsty.’” Throughout His ministry Jesus had shared with His disciples His consciousness and His conviction that in His life, death and resurrection, would be fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures and prophecies concerning Him as the promised Messiah Who would save His people from their sins.

You remember how, when He preached in the synagogue at Nazareth at the outset of His public ministry, He quoted Isaiah 61:1ff, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach...” The word “anoint” in Greek is “chrio,” from which we get our word, “Christ” — the Anointed One, the Messiah. When He read these verses from Isaiah, He immediately said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)

Do you know that Matthew alone in his Gospel quotes 163 Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the ministry of our Lord? Mark quotes 79 passages; Luke 150; and John 49.

Realizing this, we can better understand the significance of His words, “I’m thirsty”; because up to this moment, every Scripture pertaining to His death had been fulfilled except this one. David had said in Psalm 69:21, “. . . for My awful thirst they gave Me vinegar.” And in Psalm 22:15 David had said, predicting the crucifixion, “My tongue sticks to My mouth.”

Now in this Passion narrative in John 19:29 we are told, “A jar of wine vinegar was there.” This was a cheap wine, the kind of drink that was used by the common people. Undoubtedly the Roman soldiers imbibed as they carried out these executions. But listen to what happened when Jesus said, “I’m thirsty.” A rough but kind-hearted Roman soldier went over to the pitcher of sour wine that was the execution squad’s ration for the day; filled a sponge with it; stuck the sponge on the stalk of a hyssop plant that he found lying on the ground and held it up to wet the Savior’s lips.

Isn't the mention of the hyssop plant highly significant? A beautiful piece of the mosaic of redemption! For if you go back to Exodus 12:22 you read how God instructed His people, the Israelites, to prepare for the coming of the angel of death who would pass through the land on that never-to-be forgotten night when they were to be delivered from their 430 years of bondage in Egypt. God said, "Slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood in the basin, and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the door frame." That Roman soldier used a hyssop plant to give drink to Jesus, and John sees the symbolism — as the blood on the hyssop plant saved the Israelites from certain death, so the hyssop plant at Calvary is the symbol that Jesus Himself is the perfect Passover sacrifice! We should note too that according to John 19:14, Jesus was sentenced to death at the very hour when the slaughter of the Passover lambs began in the Temple precincts.

Also, in Hebrews 9:19-20 we read that, "When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the Law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool, and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, 'This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you to keep...' "So as hyssop was used in the ratification of the Old Covenant, likewise hyssop is used as Jesus established on Calvary the New Covenant, through the shedding of His blood as a full and complete atonement for sin.

One other thought — you remember how our Lord was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and how the Scripture says that "for forty days and nights He fasted, and at the end of them He was famished." (Matthew 4:2 NEB) Only when the victory over temptation was won did our Lord consider the hunger of His body. Somehow it is exactly the same with this thirst of the Cross. The physical suffering of Jesus is beyond our imagining. But far more desperate was His spiritual anguish as He bore humanity's sin upon His own unblemished soul. And it was only when the victory over sin was won that our Lord considered the suffering of His body.

An athlete, in the course of a hard-fought game, may receive a painful injury, and be practically unconscious of it. But when the game has been played to the finish, then the injury announces its presence and the young fellow may experience excruciating pain. So it was with Jesus on His Cross. It was when the hard-fought struggle for the salvation of His people had been fully accomplished that He said, "I'm thirsty."

What then are we to learn from this fifth word from the Cross? If the third word challenges us to remember the responsibility that is near at hand; if it reminds us that our Christian duty begins at home with parents and family; then surely this fifth word challenges us to do something about the poor people who live a few miles from where we meet here or the famine victims 5,000 miles across the sea.

What a privilege it was for that Roman soldier to assuage the thirst of Jesus! Wouldn't you have liked to have done something to cool that parched tongue? Well, we can! The cry of suffering humanity is heard in the Savior's words — "I am thirsty." And remember, He promises that if you see one of these "little ones," as He calls them, someone who is poor, a "nobody" in the eyes of the world and give that person so much as a cup of cold water in His name, you shall certainly not lose your reward." (Matthew 10:42)

At the Last Judgment Jesus will say to those who loved and served Him on earth, “I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink. . . then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You thirsty and give you something to drink?’ . . . The King will reply, ‘. . . whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it for Me.’” (Matthew 25:35—40)

Who are His “little ones”? Aren’t they the poor, the hungry, the underprivileged, the tenants of Skid Row, the homeless, the man or woman behind prison bars, the widow with six children whose husband was killed in a mine explosion?

What about the elderly people who must choose between bankruptcy or inadequate medical care? Christianity must always be judged by its fruits. And at a moment such as this we ask ourselves the question, what are we Christians doing so that poor people around the world will be able to eat enough to keep body and soul together? So that all will have the medical care they need? So that all will receive some education? So that the ultimate enemy of men’s bodies, “the bomb,” will never destroy those bodies that God Himself created?

What are we called to do? Well, the hungry people still cry for food. God’s will is still that all His creatures have bread and justice. We are not done yet with our task, as Christ’s people, of responding to the needs of God’s hungry folk. We must do more. The present world food crisis is real and massive. For millions of people malnutrition is a way of living and starvation a way of dying. What we read in the papers and news magazines and see on television is about real people.

And if we must act on the physical level, how much more must we act with regard to the millions who do not know Jesus as Savior. If we have received the “living water” from God, surely, we are to use it in quenching the spiritual thirst of Jesus. He thirsts for the souls of the lost. He said Himself, “He who believes in Me . . . out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water. (John 7:38) John interprets this to mean that we shall receive the Holy Spirit Who will empower us as Christians to evangelize the world! And as we share the water of life with others, we shall, at the same time, be helping to assuage the thirst of the Savior Himself. Are you doing the best you can to bring that water to thirsty souls all around you: And in so doing, satisfying the thirst of Him who agonized on the Cross for you?

Let me close by repeating the words of a beautiful hymn composed on this fifth word of our Lord —

“His are the thousand sparkling rills
That from a thousand fountains burst,
And fill with music all the hills;
And yet He says, ‘I thirst.’

All fiery pangs on battlefields,
On fever beds where sick folk toss,
Are in that human cry He yields
To anguish on the Cross.

But more than pains that racked Him then
Was the deep longing thirst divine
That thirsted for the souls of men;
Dear Lord! And one was mine.

O Love most patient, give me grace;
Make all my soul athirst for thee;
That parched dry lip, that fading face,
That thirst, were all for me.”

AMEN.