

***After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst."
(John 19.28)***

I thirst.

This is now the fifth last word of Jesus spoken on the cross. It is a simple word. It is a word that is amazingly simple in its ordinariness and yet is amazingly rich theological soil for us. Knowing that all is finished, Jesus speaks these words, as John reminds us, to fulfill the Scripture. In doing so he piques our curiosity – for what exactly does Jesus thirst?

There is a common item that lies at the bedside table of most hospice patients. It looks a little bit like a Pepto-Bismol pill on a lollipop stick. This little contraption may look funny but it provides a significant relief to the dry mouths of the dying who can no longer drink water on their own. It is a soothing balm on the parched lips of those who are very close to entering the nearer presence of the Lord. It is an instrument of delicate and loving kindness usually wielded by a loved one who seeks to help another transition into eternal life. And while this little instrument is simple, it is also a powerful antidote to the deep thirst of the dying.

That Jesus, now coming to the end of his life, thirsts should not surprise us. He is, even now, fully experiencing his humanity. The words he speaks are common words, spoken everyday by children and adults, the healthy and diseased, the living and the dying.

I thirst, he says. And it is no wonder that the nearby soldiers fashion their own simple, thirst-quenching instrument by placing a wine-soaked sponge on a hyssop branch and hold it to Jesus' mouth for him to quench his thirst. Jesus drinks. We might conclude that Jesus thirsts

no more, that the dry mouth of this dying man is relieved. We might believe that his thirst is quenched by a bit of sour wine.

We would be mistaken. Jesus does not thirst for sour wine. However real his thirst may be it will not be quenched by wine or even fresh water. Nor do we have the option of taking these two simple and everyday words metaphorically or euphemistically as some might suggest. Jesus does not thirst for relief from the pain and agony of his cross. He does not thirst for a miracle of deliverance. None of these things will quench the thirst of him who is, ironically, the source of Living Water the drinking of which will lead to an end to thirst.

For what, then, does Jesus thirst?

Jesus thirsts for his followers to see the fulfillment of Scripture. It is generally regarded that this word – “I thirst” – is meant to take us back to Psalm 69.21. “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” Psalm 69 begins with the words, “Save me, O God!” and ends with the words, “For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah.” (vv.1, 35a) This psalm with its own story of a faithful one struggling amidst persecution and mistreatment was probably regarded by the Evangelist, and possibly by Jesus himself, as an appropriate theological reflection on the crucifixion. The desire by John to remind us of the fulfilling of Scripture is not meant to over-sentimentalize Jesus’ thirst or to proof text the Hebrew Scripture. That Jesus is experiencing the “gall” and the “vinegar” (as some translations offer that which we identify as “sour wine”) is meant to open us up to the truth that Jesus is also experiencing the hope of God’s salvation offered in the psalm.

Jesus thirsts for God's salvation. Jesus recognizes that all is finished. Finished means completed. The psalmist writes: "But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness." (vs. 13) Jesus recognizes that this is the "acceptable time." Even now on the cross he encounters "the abundance of [God's] steadfast love." Truly there is now nothing left to be done except to gaze in awe and wonder at the unpredictable and faithful power of God. Jesus has accomplished the work that began on a dark night centuries earlier in ancient Egypt. The Exodus began with the children of Israel taking bundles of hyssop dipped in the blood of the Passover lamb and marking their doorways in order to keep them safe from the death that was to come upon Egypt thus marking the moment of freedom from slavery. (Exodus 12.22) God will act once again for the salvation of his children, indeed for the whole of his creation. Only this time a hyssop branch will carry sour wine to the lips of the Passover Lamb as the New Exodus, the new moment of salvation for the children of Israel and the world come into being.

Jesus thirsts for the renewing of all. Jesus hangs on the cross – an instrument of torture and warning by the corrupt power which rules of the world of Jesus day. The cross represents the threat of death. It is a coercive reminder of the existing power structure's desire for conformity. Jesus, it was understood by the onlookers, hung on the cross because he walked outside the lines of convention both among the religious leaders of his own people and among the powers that be in the world. But in the hands of an unpredictable God, the cross – an instrument of shame and folly – becomes the very instrument of victory and new life for the

world. Jesus, in a sense, walks into the camp of the enemies of God and uses their own not-so-secret weapon against them. “For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners.” (v.32) Death will no longer be the dominant power in the world. The whole of creation will be renewed.

Jesus thirsts for justice. Thus, all is soon to be made right. Soon is the time of renewal. Soon God’s people will “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” (Ps. 96.9) Soon justice will “roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5.24) Soon, the ways of God will be embodied and proclaimed by all of God’s people. Soon, the people of God will understand and fulfill God’s requirement to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with...God.” (Micah 6.8) The world will be made right. Relationships will be made right. Life will reflect fully the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6.10)

The Samaritan woman the fourth chapter of John comes to the well at midday to draw water. She comes at midday because she does not fit the conventional model of womanhood of her day. She is not one with whom a good Jew would keep company. And yet, Jesus asks her to draw him some water.

He thirsts.

And yet, it is not water from this earthly well that will slake his thirst. His desire is for the woman to ask him for water – living water. The woman is thirsty but she is confused. She is confused by her conversation with Jesus. How can he draw water, he has no bucket and the water well is deep. He is a stranger to her and is not greater than their ancestral father, Jacob.

But there are deeper confusions at work in the woman. She is confused about her identity. She is confused about her lifestyle. She is confused about her own faith and the faith of her people. She is confused about a God who would allow the kind of hardships that has led her to this point in her life. The quenching of her physical thirst from this earthly well is symbolic of her focus on merely meeting the material requirements of her and her lover's lonely life together.

"Everyone who drinks of this water," says Jesus, "will be thirsty again. But, whoever drinks of the water I will give will never thirst again. The water that I will give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life." At once the woman recognizes that for which she thirsts. "Sir, give me this water."

For what do you thirst?

Do you thirst for waters from the wells of the world which promise ease and comfort and security? Do you thirst for the waters of religious purity and spiritual pomp? Do you thirst for power and control? Do you thirst for that which will leave you thirsty as you lie on your deathbed?

Or, will you thirst with Jesus? Will you thirst for the Scriptures to be fulfilled in, through and around your life? Will you thirst to proclaim the hope of salvation offered by Jesus to those nearby and far away? Will you thirst for the renewing of all things in your life and in the world around you? Will you thirst for justice and mercy and kindness? Will you thirst for the promised Living Waters offered by Jesus which well up to everlasting life?

May our prayer this night be, "Yes, Lord. Give us this water today and always."