

St. John's version of the Passion involves a carefully crafted sequence ending with the last words from the Cross. First, Jesus gives his mother and the Beloved Disciple to each other. "Woman," he says, "behold your son." And then to the disciple, "Behold your mother."

Next, Jesus, knowing that all things were now finished, says, "I thirst." John does not say who or why, just that *someone* gives Jesus a sponge-full of vinegary wine as if to express the cry from the depths of sorrow in Psalm 69: "...in my thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink."

And finally, he says: "It is finished." Or at least, that's how the interpretation we heard today conveys what Jesus said. Then he lowered his head and delivered up his spirit.

Now, there is something important that may not be clear in the English of the New Revised Standard Version of John's Gospel. The English word, "finished," can mean "over" or it can mean "ruined," "doomed" or "defeated." And so, we can hear this phrase leaving the dying lips of Jesus as though he is simply giving up or somehow lamenting the end of his earthly existence.

And yet, John consistently gives us a picture of Jesus in command of his life, always purposeful. John's Gospel always has the resurrection in sight, as though the point is to hear the entire Gospel to the end and then return to the beginning and hear it again.

That's why we read this same passage every Good Friday. The repetition allows us to hear and experience that Jesus on the cross is not conceding failure to the powers of Empire. Jesus, the living Word of God, is saying nearly the opposite.

Unlike the English, John's Greek is quite precise. Jesus says: "It has been completed, perfected." In Latin, "Consummatum est."

John's Jesus is announcing that he has done what the Word made Flesh came into the world to do. John's Jesus, who said "I am the vine, you are the branches," drinks sour wine just before he dies,

in the awareness that his earthly purpose is complete. Jesus has created the community that will embody his Spirit in the world.

His human body is the source of his physical thirst. And yet, as physically thirsty as he likely is, this thirst also has second source, another layer of motivation. From the cross, the words “It has been perfected” also come from the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos who was present with God and who was God in the origin of all things, through whom all things came to be.

Early in John’s Gospel, a travel-weary Jesus asks a Samaritan woman, Photina, for a drink of water to slake his human thirst. When she questions the appropriateness of his behavior, he responds: “If you recognized God’s gift and who is saying it is saying to you ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water’.”

As she begins to become aware of the gift speaking with her, she probes further. Jesus responds: “Everyone who drinks of this water (the earthly H₂O in the well) will thirst again, but whoever drinks from the water that I shall give will most definitely never thirst until the age to come; rather the water that I shall give will become [in those who take it in] a fountain springing up to the life of the Age,” to eternal life.

Later, Jesus is in the Temple on the final day of the Feast of Booths or Sukkot. Now, every biblical holiday that YHWH gave to the Jewish people has three aspects. Israel was to observe the holiday in the present (one) in order to remember something YHWH had done in the past (two), while looking forward (three) to some future prophetic purpose hidden within each festival.

During the week of Sukkot, first century Jews gathered together in Jerusalem to remember the past when YHWH provided for them in the wilderness and also to look forward to the promised Messianic age, the “age to come,” when all nations will flow to the Holy City to worship YHWH.

Most temple sacrifices included a ritual of pouring wine libations over the altar. And during the annual celebration of Sukkot, YHWH determined how much rain would fall that winter, the primary rainy season in the Holy Land.

And so, during Sukkot in temple times, there was a second ritual where water was also poured over the altar. This ritual grew into a joyful celebration called “the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing.” The Talmud says, “He who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life.”

And it was at the peak of this celebration that John’s Jesus stood and announced: “If anyone is thirsty, let [them] come to me and let [them] drink. Whoever has faith in me, just as scripture has said, ‘Out of [their] inner parts streams of living water will flow’.”

In the reading we heard today, that same Jesus gives his mother and the Beloved Disciple to each other from the cross. They are the seeds of the community that will grow to embody his Spirit in the world at Pentecost.

And then he says, “I am thirsty.” Physically thirsty because he is truly and completely human, and the water that gives life to humans is drained from his body. And spiritually thirsty because the truly and completely Divine Christ has emptied himself. He has poured out his spirit for us and has set before us the offering of eternal life.

Seeing this, he can say “It has been perfected.” The implications of these words are almost too overwhelming to absorb. And yet, the gift, if we will recognize it, remains before us. The invitation Jesus gave to Photina at the well is extended to us all from the now-empty cross: “If anyone is thirsty, let [them] come to me and let [them] drink. Whoever has faith in me, just as scripture has said, ‘Out of [their] inner parts streams of living water will flow’.”

When Jesus had taken the sour wine, he said “It has been completed.” And lowering his head he delivered up his spirit.

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