

JOHN 19.28: I AM THIRSTY

[Chelmsford 29 March 2009]

In the calendar of the church today is Passion Sunday.

Passion Sunday is the day when traditionally we remember the suffering of Jesus.

The 'schmaltz' of Mothering Sunday is over – we are back to the harsh realities of life – and not least the harsh reality of Jesus life.

"Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed; and in order to make the scripture come true, he said, 'I am thirsty'" (19.28)

Crucifixion was an awful agonising death. Yet unlike Mel Gibson in his film *The Passion* the Gospel writers give few details of the torture involved.

Jesus as he hung on that cross, he must have been in intense pain – but only once did he refer to his pain, and that was when he cried out **"I am thirsty"**.

1. The agony of body

It was not surprising that Jesus was **thirsty**. It was after all the middle of the day.

Just think of the heat and the dust. Jesus' throat was parched.

He longed to moisten his lips, let alone have a decent drink.

"I am thirsty", he cried.

This very cry emphasises the physical agony of the Cross. In the words of one commentator: this is *"a curiously carnal, bodily, somatic and mundane word"* (Willimon). Jesus did not appear to suffer - **he really suffered** in his body

There were those in the early church who were unwilling to take the humanity of Jesus seriously.

E.g. in the so-called *Acts of John* it is said that the feet of Jesus left no print on the ground when he walked, and that his body was immaterial to the touch.

Jesus was held to have a 'psychic' body, not subject to the laws of matter, not subject to any human desire, passion, or emotion, and quite incapable of feeling pain.

But this was not true - Jesus had a body like you and me.

"The Word became a human being" (Jn 1.14) declared John in his Prologue.

God became man – and in becoming man, he became 100% man.

John was not saying Jesus was half God and half man – no he was 100% God, and 100% man. And as a man, he knew what bodily pain was all about.

The drops of blood were real, the sweat was real, the torn flesh was real – and so too was the terrible thirst. **"I am thirsty"** – *'I am gasping for a drink'*

John writes that it was **"in order to make the Scripture come true"** that Jesus cried out **"I am thirsty"**.

Some people have seen a reference to Psalm 22, which begins with the words **"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me"** (22.1). The Psalmist goes on to depict the anguish of a righteous sufferer: **"My throat is as dry as dust, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth"** (22.15).

However, Psalm 69 is more apposite. There too the Psalmist describes the anguish of a righteous sufferer: **"Insults have broken my heart, and I am in despair... when I was thirsty, they offered me vinegar"** (69.20,21).

Indeed, this is precisely what the soldiers did.

They offered him cheap wine, so cheap that it was tantamount to vinegar.

John writes: "**A bowl was there, full of cheap wine; so a sponge was soaked in the wine, put on a stalk of hyssop and lifted up to his lips**" (19.29)

This link between the event & the purpose of God does not mean that Jesus cried out simply to make Scripture come true - he cried out because *he was desperately thirsty*.

And yet, Jesus, as any good Jew of those days, would have known the Scriptures.

It is conceivable that his mind did go to Psalms 22 & 69.

Unintentionally they became prophetic of the sufferings of Jesus.

Psalms 69 begins: "**Save me, O God. The water is up to my neck; I am sinking in deep mud, and there is no solid ground. I am out in deep water, and the waves are about to drown me**". Jesus could well have identified himself with the feelings of the Psalmist. He must have felt out of his depth. Dying is never an easy business.

But Jesus was not just drowning. He was suffering.

Tortured by thirst, his whole body must have been in agony.

2. The agony of mind

The agony was more than physical. It was also mental.

It must have been appalling to be surrounded by people mocking him.

The Jewish leaders mocked him - the Roman soldiers mocked him - the crowd mocked him. What a dreadful experience.

There you are seeking to do something for God - but nobody understands, nobody cares. Instead, as a joke, they make you wear a crown of thorns.

This agony of mind is prefigured in Ps 69.

- Interestingly, Jesus quotes from Ps 69 in the Upper Room, when he warned his disciples of the hatred they will experience. "**If the world hates you, just remember that it has hated me first.... This, however, was bound to happen so that what is written in their Law may come true: 'They hated me for no reason at all'**" (Jn 15.18). This quotation is from Ps 69.4: "**Those who hate me for no reason are more numerous than the hairs of my head**".
- Later the Psalmist writes: "**You know how I am insulted, how I am disgraced and dishonoured; you see all my enemies. Insults have broken my heart, and I am in despair. I had hoped for sympathy, but there was none; for comfort, but I found none. When I was hungry, they gave me poison; when I was thirsty, they offered me vinegar**" (Ps 69.19-21).

What a dreadful experience it was to be misunderstood, rejected, mocked, hated, by those you came to save.

Jesus must have longed (thirsted) for people to understand and to accept him, to welcome him and to love him. But no - they turned their backs on him.

Part of the agony of the Cross was surely the agony of mind as well as the agony of body.

3. *The agony of soul*

Maybe, when Jesus cried out "**I am thirsty**", the thirst was not purely physical or mental. Maybe the cry expressed the agony of the spirit.

For Jesus on the cross experienced a dreadful sense of desolation.

This agony of the soul is reflected in his cry from the cross: "**My God, my God, why did you abandon me?**" (Mk 15.34).

Jesus, who dared to call God 'Abba, Father', now experienced a dreadful darkness of the soul. In this time of need, God seemed so far away. Jesus was alone.

In that dreadful experience of aloneness, Jesus longed for a sense of God's presence.

But that presence was not there. God was strangely absent.

He cried out to God, but God was strangely silent.

In the Psalms that longing for God is often expressed in terms of thirst: e.g.

- Ps 42.1,2: "**As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for you, the living God; when can I go and worship in your presence? Day and night I cry, and tears are my only food; all the time my enemies ask me, 'Where is your God?'**" Jesus too thirsted for God - but his thirst remained unslaked. God seemed to have given up on him
- This same thirst for God comes to expression also in Ps 69: "**I am worn out from calling for help and my throat is aching. I have strained my eyes looking for your help... Answer me, Lord, in the goodness of your constant love; in your great compassion turn to me! Don't hide yourself from your servant; I am in great trouble - answer me now! Come to me and save me; rescue me from my enemies**" (Ps 69.3,16-18). How prophetic these words of the Psalmist came to be of what must have gone through the mind of Jesus.

"**I am thirsty**," cried Jesus.

The thirst is all the more poignant, in so far as earlier on in his ministry Jesus had declared: "**Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink**" (Jn 7.37: see 6.35).

Indeed he had promised the woman at the well that "**Whoever drinks the water that I will give... will never be thirsty again**" (Jn 4.14).

But here he, the Thirst-Quencher, was thirsty - thirsty for God!

His soul must have been in agony.

4. *The passion of the heart*

But the cry "**I thirst**" may represent more than the agony of Jesus, experienced in body, mind and soul. It may also represent the passion of the heart of Jesus to do the will of the Father. Jesus passionately longed to do the will of God, whatever the cost.

In today's society it's not 'cool' to be passionate.

It's often regarded as a sign of immaturity to be too single-minded about a cause.

But unlike Buddha, Jesus wasn't into serene contentment – Jesus was passionate to serve God

- E.g. John tells us that on one occasion, when his disciples were hungry and were concerned to buy bread, Jesus said to them "**My food is to obey the will of the one who sent me and to finish the work he gave me to do**" (Jn 4.34)
- When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to say first "**Your will be done, on earth as in heaven**", and only then "**Give us today the food we need**"
- In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus used the twin metaphors of hunger & thirst to describe those who wanted to go all out to do God's will: "**Happy are those 'who hunger and thirst' [NRSV – GNB whose greatest desire is] to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully**" (Matt 5.6)

"**I am thirsty**" - I long, with all my heart, to do your will.

This longing to do the will of God had dominated the life of Jesus throughout his ministry.

Indeed, according to John that was why Jesus made a whip and drove the animals out of the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. John wrote that "**His disciples remembered that the scripture [Psalm 69] says, 'My devotion to your house, O God, burns in me like a fire'**" (Jn 2.17). Or as the NRSV expresses it: "**It is zeal for your house which has consumed me**" (NRSV).

This zeal/passion/longing comes to its climax in the Cross.

"**I am thirsty**", cried Jesus.

Or in the words of Hebs 10.7: "**Here I am, to do your will, O God**".

My mind goes to Isaiah 53: "**The Lord says, 'It was my will that he should suffer; his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness.... through him my purpose will succeed'**" (Is 53.10)

5. *The passion for us*

Inevitably this passion to do God's will, leads me on to speak of the passion of Jesus for us. It was for us, that Jesus hung and suffered there. It was for us that he thirsted.

Mark tells us that when Jesus "**saw a large crowd, his heart went out to them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd**" (Mk 6.34 REB). Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, commented: "*It was an almost physical longing to reach them, to woo them, to embrace them, and to win them home where they belonged*"

Jesus had not simply a passion to do God's will, but also a passion to save us. Jesus did not suffer for the Father's sake, but for our sake. Jesus experienced the agony of the Cross, that we might be spared the agony of Hell. It was to draw us to himself that Jesus died. So in John's Gospel we hear Jesus saying: "**When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself**" (Jn 12.32).

How dreadful at that moment it must have been to see people indifferent to his love. There they were, turning their backs on him, spurning God's salvation. How Jesus longed to see them respond to God and his love. Jesus 'thirsted' to see people respond to God. Indeed, even now Jesus longs to see us respond to God and his love.

Significantly, it is at this point where Jesus parts company with Psalm 69. For there the righteous sufferer calls down doom and damnation upon his tormentors. "**Strike them with blindness!.... Keep a record of all their sins; don't let them have any part in your salvation. May their names be erased from the book of the living; may they not be included in the list of your people**" (Ps 69.23a, 27-28).

But Jesus does not wish doom & damnation upon us. Jesus longs for us to experience **salvation**. He longs for our names to be included in **the book of the living**. So Jesus cries out: "**Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing**" (Lk 23.34). But forgiveness is a two-way thing. We can only be forgiven, as we open our hearts to receive God's forgiveness. If we would know salvation, if we would be included in "**the book of the living**", then we must respond to God and his love.

At the end of his Gospel John sums up the purpose of his book. "**These (things) have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith you may have life**" (Jn 20.31). This morning let me appeal to each one of you to believe in Jesus, so that through your faith in the Crucified you too may have life in his name