

THIRST :

a homily praught by the Rev'd Floyd Monroe Stallings,
Rector of the Church of the Ascension,
in the church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,
during the Preaching of the Passion at the Liturgy of Good Friday,
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On the Fifth of Christ's Seven Last Words from the Cross
(John xix²⁹):



I thirst.
**In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:
AMEN.**



ALTHOUGH NO DOUBT I HAVE SAID countless times in various situations, “Wow, I am so thirsty,” the truth is it is unlikely that I have ever been deeply thirsty, certainly not physically. The bubble in which I live is carefully maintained to prevent genuine, physical thirst; for that matter, extreme need – thirst or anything else - is not often a reality for me. My guess is that this truth about me is also true for you as it reflects our cultural context; the luck of our birth means that we are insulated from much actual deprivation. What passes for need is in actuality quite fleeting and easily rectified.

Thirst – we avoid it at large costs. In fact, having a beverage of some sort in our hands occurs often throughout the day. A curious development in recent years in our culture is the commercialization of water. Even just ten years ago, it would never have occurred to us to buy water – any more than it would have occurred to us to spend five dollars on something called a latte or even six dollars for a skinny latte with a double shot of something! Although in weak moments I have done so, my daddy would roll over in his grave if he had any idea that I had paid eight or ten dollars for a big bottle of bubbly water for the table. Happily I report that I have turned from those ways, probably out of economic necessity, and now take it as a personal project to summarily dismiss all offers of sparkling water at restaurant tables, asking in a loud, proud, and somewhat surly voice for tap water. Water bottles containing all varieties of water – flavored, energy enhanced, vitamin enriched - are ubiquitous in our society; and though their ubiquity speaks less to our desire for the satiation of real thirst than to the quest for an appearance of hip healthiness, their prevalence does reflect something about our never wanting to be caught thirsty. In fact aridness in most things is avoided. We hydrate and moisturize our skin, our nasal passages, our plants, and the air in our homes during a long winter; moisture for living things is clearly preferable to anything dry, brittle, or rough.

It is impossible upon reflection to miss the sharp contrast between our lives of pampered opulence and hyper-hydration and the circumstances of the event we recall today.

In a profoundly arid land on a starkly lifeless day, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said,

“I am thirsty.”

Of course, he was thirsty. Brutally unforgiving, the noonday sun in Palestine had parched his bruised, battered body. The loss of blood, the lack of sleep, the sweat, and the exertion had taken their toll; all of his body's hydration no doubt had seeped away. Over the years, reflections on this saying of Jesus have often centered on his thirst as one more piece of evidence of his essential humanness. I suppose it is that; and, yet, for me it is unnecessary evidence. His humanness, though of course mysterious and complex, is the most accessible part of the Jesus story for me. The Incarnation means that in God's great self-donation, Jesus was one of us, subject to every need and foible known to us.

Today on this day of passion we recall this gift of God's self to us, and particularly this year our senses have been bombarded with images of the last hours of Christ's life. I have to admit that I have not been swept up in the Mel Gibson sweepstakes, also known as his film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Less kindly and more directly, I have been repulsed not only by its violence but more importantly by the suggestion of its focus that Jesus' dying is somehow infinitely more important than his living. In the wake of this film and all of the conversation about it before and since Ash Wednesday, I was not sure how the week of Passion would strike me this year. In an odd reactive way, I feared that the mass distribution of Gibson's scenes on the side of every bus and from every screen might hinder my reflection rather than enhance it. There may have been some of that for me, but . . . I must say that in my own meditating on this saying of Jesus, "I thirst," I found myself strangely and unexpectedly moved.

Like most preachers, while preparing for this homily, I had my moments of thinking, "why in the world did I agree to do this, like I needed one more thing in Holy Week." You know of course that we are the busiest, most important people in the world during Holy Week. Just ask us. We are so busy and important in fact that sometimes we more than most folks are immune to the power of the week, so careful to reenact it for everyone else that we miss it ourselves. Though it seems self-serving in a way to say so, this opportunity to reflect with you on this saying of Jesus has been a surprising gift.

I don't have it all wrapped up theologically, a fact which is not at all surprising. I suppose that claiming that Jesus was thirsty for me, for all of us moves toward some understanding of the act, but I am not sure exactly what that means. All I know is in some way that none of our best attempts to articulate have clarified successfully, Jesus' thirsty presence on that cross is connected to us. Is it salvific? I suppose – as his life was, as in fact the

gift of all creation was and is designed for our salvation. It is, then, an act of salvation in whatever way we must understand that.

What moves me now, though, is not the theology of it all but its fleshiness. Two millennia ago a man, a fully human man, made a divine choice, a choice to live in such a radically loving way that he had to be killed. The love of Jesus, you see, was dangerously searing; it cut its way through centuries of law and tradition, challenging the old and ushering in the new, uprooting the powerful and lifting up the poor, quenching thirst in a way that no other water ever had before or has since. Perhaps, then, the ultimate connection with us is that Jesus' thirst on the cross foreshadows the spiritual thirst which must inevitably accompany our own death to the old as we are born to the new.

If that is the case, O Lord God, make us deeply thirsty, thirsty for you, for your truth, for your goodness, for your justice – thirsty again – with a thirst that only you can quench in the newness of life.

**In the Name of God:
Amen.**



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The cover shows a drawing of the *Crucifixion* by Rembrandt (1650s), with Christ being given vinegar on a sponge; now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.