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Sermon by Theologian Gilbert Meilaender

The Fifth Word  
“I Thirst”

“I thirst,” Jesus says.

But, of course, the dying are often thirsty. Is anything more ordinary than that? What we come to observe on this Good Friday is, therefore, nothing unusual. We see what human beings have often seen, what we ourselves may well have seen, what we ourselves may one day experience: that the dying are thirsty.

The bystanders around the cross—soldiers and others—could not, therefore, have been particularly surprised when Jesus says “I thirst.” They seem even to have been prepared for it, having the sour wine there for just such a possibility.

But St. John does not intend us to see here only something ordinary and expected. No, for John it’s clear that God is at work in what is happening, active in this crucifixion. So Jesus does not, in John’s Gospel, say “I thirst” simply because he’s a dying man and therefore naturally thirsts.

Jesus thirsts because everything is now finished, and the scriptures of Israel are being brought to their completion on this cross—a completion of the long story of God’s own thirst. God’s long, involved, convoluted plan, beginning with Abraham, to make of Israel a faithful people, a light to the nations—that plan now comes to its final act. Here at last is what God has been thirsting for all along—a truly faithful Israelite. And such a man must inevitably end on a cross, must be at cross purposes with a world that does not want to be formed and shaped in the ways of obedience and faithfulness.

So Jesus thirsts—because he is the faithful one for whom we have been waiting, the Israelite whom God provides. Jesus makes his own the prayer of Israel’s psalmist:

*Save me, O God! . . . .  
I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched. . . .  
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. . . .  
[But] I will praise the name of God with a song;  
I will magnify him with thanksgiving. . . .  
For the LORD hears the needy.*

The Lord hears the needy. Jesus thirsts not just because dying men thirst, but because God thirsts—thirsts for us. So Job, that great sufferer, says even in the

midst of his suffering: “You will call, and I will answer you. You will long for the creature you have made.”

God longs for us, the creature he has made for himself. Think of what that means for Christians on this Good Friday. We are no longer simply observers or onlookers. This is where we get invited into the story. The Almighty God, the One who made all that is, thirsts for you and for me. Thirsts with a desire so great that it brings him to this cross.

No matter how often Israel forgot her covenant with the LORD, he did not forget. “How can I give you up, O Israel,” he says through the prophet Hosea. And Jesus himself, in one of his most unforgettable parables, pictures for us the waiting father—standing anxiously by the door, scanning the horizon for the return of his wayward son, thirsting to be reconciled with him and eager to celebrate his homecoming. We are invited into the story as those for whom God thirsts.

But we are also invited into this story in a second way—as those who are given the opportunity to quench Jesus’ thirst. This is not the first time in John’s Gospel that Jesus has been thirsty. Back in chapter 4, at Jacob’s well in Samaria, he had asked a Samaritan woman to give him water to drink, and she had done so. She had—think of it—she had quenched God’s thirst.

Where are the faithful ones here in John’s crucifixion story? We’re familiar, of course, with the presence of at least one of the disciples, and the women, and Jesus’ mother Mary in particular, around the cross. But who runs to quench his thirst? John writes: “A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.”

Who are they—the ones who do this? Almost surely, the soldiers themselves. They had done their duty as executioners. They stood observing the three deaths. But when this dying man says he’s thirsty, when they are invited to participate in a different way in his story, they do not miss their chance. They do not remain simply onlookers. They may not know exactly what they are doing. We may not know exactly what moves them to do it or whether they’re really even trying to be of help. But—the fact is the fact—they quench God’s thirst.

The question for us this Good Friday is whether we can measure up to the standard set by that Samaritan woman and these Roman soldiers. When, in a well-known passage in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus pictures the final judgment, he says to those who are to inherit the kingdom: “Come . . . for I was thirsty and you gave me drink.” “When, Lord,” they ask, “did we see you thirsty?” “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me,” he replies.

Which is to say, day after day—not just today, but day after day—we are invited into this Good Friday story. Invited not just to be onlookers or observers at Jesus’ cross but active participants who seek to quench his thirst. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, like these soldiers, we are to see in the thirsty faces of those around us the face of Jesus—the face of the God whose thirst for us is so great that he ends on this cross. Those faces all around us thirst for water, for peace, for help with the burdens they carry, for friendship, for freedom from the

anxieties and demons that haunt them, for freedom to pursue their plans and projects—and, above all, they thirst to learn of the God who thirsts for them.

In this springtime it is no longer the bleak midwinter, but the words of the English Christmas carol by that name express as simply as can be how we should respond when invited into this story of the God who thirsts for us:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*