

Meditation on "I Thirst"

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After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), "I thirst."
(Jn 18:28)

This is not the first time that we have heard of the thirst of Jesus. You recall his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, earlier in St John's Gospel. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (Jn 4:7) As He unfolds the mystery contained in His words, He says, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." (Jn 4:10)

Two instances of the thirst of Christ: first, wearied from His labors, sitting down by a well (cf. Jn 4:6) and now, drained by His labor on the Cross...and in both cases, He thirsts in the same sense: not from a lack, but from a superabundance...an ardent desire to receive the love of human hearts and to fill those same hearts with divine charity.

We can and certainly should understand that both these instances reveal a true bodily need...in the first, from the physical exhaustion of travel and teaching...in the second, from the loss of blood. In fact, it has been said that the thirst arising from crucifixion is the most severe pain in the sharpest form of death.

But we also know that Our Lord always uses the natural to elevate our gaze to the supernatural...from the sensible or visible to that which is hidden and mysterious. Nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus complain of physical discomfort, and so His urgent words "I thirst" convey a *spiritual, sublime invitation* to which we must respond...indeed, for which we are made. With reverence, we can say that it is not so much the mouth of the Lord that is dry, but His heart.

In Hebrew, the same word means both "thirst" and "soul." And so the Savior of the world longs ardently for the soul-water, the love, of His people...the human soul is created to thirst for God...even as God deeply desires the love of man.

In the Psalms, we find these lines:

"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." (Ps 42:1-2)

"O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is." (Ps 63:1)

"I stretch out my hands to you; My soul thirsts for you like a parched land." (Ps 143:6)

In the fullness of His humanity, Jesus prayed these words. In the perfection of His human nature, He shows us plainly, poignantly, the reason for our lives: to receive the love of God, and to offer Him our love, now and in eternity.

But in the Psalms, we also find this: “In my thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink.” (Ps 69:21) And so it was at Calvary, as recorded by St John: “A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth...Jesus...received the vinegar...” (Jn 19:29,30) Vinegar symbolizes man’s rejection of God, the bitter taste of sin, which the Son of God painfully accepted. This is proof that the Lord does not reject us when even we reject Him.

At the well in Samaria, Jesus said,“...but whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (Jn 4:14)

...and later in the temple, as also recorded by St John: “Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink.’” (Jn 7:37)

To feel the impact of Jesus’ words “I thirst,” we must stand at the foot of the Cross with Our Lady, St John the Evangelist, and St Mary Magdalene. These three figures remain at Calvary when everyone has fled. What kept them there? Purity of heart. Only to the extent that we desire and work toward purity of heart—to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength...and not to have strange gods before Him—only then will we hear the voice of Jesus thirsting for our love.

Of course, at the moment He spoke, Jesus foresaw all of the excuses that would be offered to Him over time...all of our neglect and our malice. This knowledge must have sharpened the cry He made...the pain of unrequited love. We know that we look elsewhere, against God’s will, contrary to our own good, for satisfaction and affection.

We lack a simple trust in God...we are too self-reliant, too impressed with our own accomplishments...ours is not the “thirst for righteousness” Jesus urges in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:6). We do well to call to mind the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” (Jer 2:13)

If we are to satiate the thirst of Jesus on the Cross, we must pray for a pure heart to hear Him and respond...to set aside sin, to struggle against selfishness and pride.

God thirsts that we may thirst for Him. If the last word, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” reveals the suffering of man without God, these words—“I thirst”—reveal the suffering of God without man. He thirsts for our sake.

Mother Teresa: “He longs for you...My children, once you have experienced the thirst, the love of Jesus for you, you will never need, you will never thirst for these things which can only lead you away from Jesus, the true and living Fountain. Only the thirst of Jesus, feeling it, hearing it, answering it with all your heart will keep your love alive. The closer you come to Jesus the better you will know His thirst.”