

“I am thirsty”

*A meditation offered by John Wirenius
at The Three Hours Service, April 6, 2012.
Good Friday.
Based on John 19: 25b-28.*

So says Jesus from the Cross—in St. John’s Gospel. It’s a rare moment of vulnerability for Jesus in this Gospel, which stresses Jesus’s union with the Father, his unflappable serenity throughout his ministry, even throughout the Passion narrative. But here, as when he weeps at Lazarus’s tomb, Jesus’s humanity is on display

“I thirst.”

Such a simple, basic need in ordinary times—like when in the same Gospel, Jesus asks the Samaritan Woman for a drink from Jacob’s well. But this isn’t any ordinary time. Of the Seven Last Words of Jesus, this is the only one that refers to the physical pain that Jesus has endured for hours.¹ The end isn’t nigh; it has arrived. Thirst in those last moments takes on an outsize power—I remember being at the bedside of my grandfather in his last illness, the last time I saw him, asking for relief with a simple need that wrung my heart. A dignified man, much loved, but with dignity thrust to the side by failing nature.

Now, at the end of things, Jesus is dying, there is nothing left to do, and at last that iron self-control breaks. He asks for relief from his executioners. Surprisingly, they give it; “a diluted, vinegary wine drunk by soldiers and laborers,” called *posca*, offered by some of the soldiers guarding the dying criminals in a moment of kindness.² And, almost equally surprisingly, Jesus accepts it, just before the very end.

At first, it might seem that this last thirst, this moment of human need, has nothing to say to us. A fleeting moment of weakness of the flesh on Jesus’s part; a momentary, essentially trivial act of mercy on the part of some unknown soldier or soldiers. But maybe not. These were no doubt hard men living a hard life, in which cruelty was routine; yet something in Jesus touched them; can an act of mercy ever truly be wasted?

And Jesus has now answered his own question, “Am I not to drink of the cup the Father has given me?”³ He does it, in faith, even though in his case the cup is one of suffering and death. This man who spoke of the blessing of “thirsting for righteousness,” now, in his last moments, “thirsts to drink that cup to the last drop, for only when he has

¹ William Temple, *Studies in St. John’s Gospel, First and Second Series*, at 368 (1945).

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (1970) at 909 (Anch. Bib. Vol. 29A); William Temple, *Studies, op. cit.*

³ John 18: 11.

tasted the bitter wine of death will his Father's will be fulfilled."⁴ He has been faithful to the end.

And us? What is the righteousness we should thirst for? Isn't Jesus walking, as we all are called to walk, the same threefold path as described by Micah—that we should do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God? We all have opportunities throughout life to show compassion, to strive for justice. But those opportunities can be isolated glimmers of light in the dark, like the gift of wine the soldiers gave Jesus, or they can form a pattern in life, around which we form our very selves. They can be haphazard, or integral to our efforts to and live the authentic life, the abundant life, to which God is calling us.

Micah's third test of righteousness—walking with God—that's where abundant living has shown itself in my own path. When I have actually focused on discerning the life that God calls each of us to, the unique path each of is called to travel, I have been most myself, alive, and vital. It's an ongoing task, with many hardships, puzzles and joys along the way. There have been false starts, mistakes, and misjudgments, and I'm not alone there. Loss and even tragedy will still meet us all. But they, and our own failings, take on a new significance in the context of a whole life, one in which our walk with God can be the focus around which all our acts of mercy, our efforts on behalf of justice are gathered. They look as different then as Good Friday does from the perspective of Easter—as we continue our journey out of darkness and into light.

I thirst, Jesus said. May we all.

⁴ Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, at 930.