

Our subject for this week is the fifth of our Lord's seven sayings from the cross; namely, 'I thirst'. And our reading comes from John chapter 19, verses 28-30 ...

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now finished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I thirst!" A vessel full of sour wine was set there. They therefore put a sponge full of the sour wine on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He delivered up His spirit.

Rather surprisingly, the gospels lay very little emphasis on the physical sufferings of Jesus on the cross. And, in keeping with this, the Lord's cry 'I thirst' is the only one of His seven sayings from there which is concerned with His bodily pain – the other six being concerned either with His care for others or with His prayer to God.

Though by far the shortest of the seven sayings – being just one word of four letters in the Greek text – our Lord's cry 'I thirst' has much to tell us.

First we should note that it is hardly surprising that our Lord should be thirsty at that moment. We have only to remind ourselves of the events of the last 18 hours or so.

As far as we know, He had been given nothing to drink since supping with His apostles in the upper room the previous evening. Between then and now He had endured an agony of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, during which, Doctor Luke informed us, that 'His sweat had become as drops of blood falling down to the ground'¹ ... He had been exposed to repeated examinations before the Jewish council, Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate ... He had suffered a cruel scourging – during which He would inevitably have lost a considerable amount of blood ... He had carried His cross for part of the way to Golgotha, where His hands and His feet had been nailed to His cross – with further blood loss ... and He had now been hanging there for six long hours – three of which He had spent exposed to the searing heat of the Judean sun, and three of which He had spent bearing the weight of our sins.

Small wonder that in these circumstances – with His blood loss and dehydration generating a raging thirst – the Saviour should now crave something to drink.

The very fact He uttered such a cry shows just how real His pain and His sufferings were. And in so doing provides evidence, if we should need it, of His true humanity ... that this was no play-acting ... that He had indeed become a real man ... that, as John expressed it at the beginning of this gospel, 'the Word became flesh'.

And, as evidence of our Lord's perfect humanity, I note that, just as Matthew in his gospel records two instances when our Lord was hungry,² so John records two instances when He was thirsty – of which this is the second.³

But we recall that John had not only said in chapter 1 that 'the Word became flesh', but that 'the Word was God' ... that in Jesus we see not only manhood but deity.

And what marvels and mysteries this suggests.

For example, that the One who now declared His thirst was the self-same One who in chapter 4 of this gospel had said to the woman from Samaria who He met at Sychar's well, 'whoever drinks of the water (the spiritual water, that is) that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life'.⁴ And yet now He thirsts!

Then that the One who now declared His thirst was Him who, in chapter 7, had offered to quench the spiritual thirst of all and any; 'Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink'.⁵ And yet now He thirsts!

Again, that the One who declared His thirst from His cross was none other than Him who, according to Psalm 104, 'sends the springs into the valleys, where they flow among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field. From them the wild donkeys quench their thirst'⁶ ... the One of whom Psalm 147 says, 'Sing praises ...to our God, who covers the heavens with clouds, and who prepares rain for the earth'.⁷ And yet now He thirsts!

And yet again, that the One who now declared His thirst was the One who once satisfied the thirst of the whole nation of Israel throughout their forty years of wanderings in the wilderness. Very soon after they – the children of Israel – had left Egypt, the Lord had said to Moses, 'you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the

people may drink',⁸ which event led David to write many years later, 'He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it ran in the dry places like a river'.⁹ And yet now He thirsts!

And, speaking of David, I recall an incident in his life when he and his men were in his mountain stronghold and when he happened to express his longing for a drink from the well of Bethlehem, then in enemy hands. Three of David's mighty men overheard him speak, and, at the risk of their very lives, broke through the garrison of Philistines at Bethlehem to obtain water for him from that well.¹⁰

But here at the cross, Jesus, the Son of David, had no 'three mighty men' at hand to provide Him with water to slake His thirst. Instead, His parched lips were moistened by some of the soldiers who stood guard there that day ... and this not with pure spring water (as had been brought from Bethlehem for David), but with diluted sour wine vinegar – a cheap and popular drink in the Roman army of the day. Such was a far cry indeed from the wine – acknowledged as 'the good wine' by the master of the wedding feast at Cana – which He, the Lord Jesus, had provided liberally back in chapter 2 to meet the needs of the wedding party there!¹¹

'Jesus', we read, '*... that the scripture might be fulfilled*, said, "I thirst!" But little did the man who raised the vinegar-soaked sponge to wet our Lord's mouth suspect that, in doing so, he was fulfilling in minute detail a prophecy written by David a thousand years before: 'for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink'.¹² Nor that the very same psalm also contained Jesus the Messiah's words, 'My throat is dry'.¹³ Hence now His cry, 'I thirst'.

In one of His most solemn messages, our Lord told of a rich man who, after death, and on account of his godlessness and selfishness, found himself in a horrendous place of torment and flame, and who there pleaded for just a drop of water to cool his tongue.¹⁴

And I know my Lord suffered all He did that I might never go to that awful place ... and that, in one sense, it could therefore be said that my Saviour *endured the thirst which He did* that I might never *experience the thirst which I rightly deserve*.

For my glorious Lord was only in the position of gladly accepting an act of mercy from some unnamed soldier because, in His own free and infinite mercy towards me, He had first submitted Himself to such untold suffering.

I close with the words of Horatius Bonar, a Scottish hymn writer of the nineteenth century :

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one, stoop down, and drink, and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.*

Footnotes

¹ Luke 22. 44.

² Matt. 4. 2; 21. 18.

³ John 4. 7; 19. 28.

⁴ John 4. 14.

⁵ John 7. 37.

⁶ Psa. 104. 10-11.

⁷ Psa. 147. 8.

⁸ Exod. 17. 6; cf. Num. 8, 11.

⁹ Psa. 105. 41.

¹⁰ 2 Sam. 23. 13-17.

¹¹ John 2. 10.

¹² Psa. 69. 21.

¹³ Psa. 69. 3.

¹⁴ Luke 16. 23-28.