

The Sixth Word from the Cross: “It Is Finished”

The words “It is finished” are recorded only in John’s gospel, where they are described as Jesus’ last words. In Luke’s account, they are uttered just before his final words – the 7th Word. Matthew and Mark record that Jesus gave “a loud cry and yielded up his spirit”.

We have reached the end. Jesus has been brutally tortured to death in a humiliating public execution, branded as an enemy to his nation. This is not a peaceful passing surrounded by family -- a “good death”, as Christians sometimes express it. This is as bad a death as you could imagine. Jesus musters what strength remains to him, and his recorded words are necessarily brief -- but full of meaning for us.

I wonder occasionally what I will find to say at my final moment – if, indeed, I will have the opportunity or the presence of mind to say anything at all. Literature and movies tend to paint a picture of nobility and significance at such moments. You may recall Cyrano de Bergerac taking an inordinate amount of time to die as he bewails the loss of his “panache”. Or the witty final words of Oscar Wilde, looking around his bedroom – “this wallpaper is terrible: one of us will have to go”. But these words of Jesus are cryptic ... unheroic... seemingly pointless. Clearly he is about to die – why bother to tell us so?

John’s gospel gives us a clue. My Jerusalem Bible translates the words as “It is accomplished”, and says earlier that “Jesus knew that everything had now been completed”. John is the gospel writer who gives us, above all, an overview of Jesus’ purpose on Earth: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”. There is a path and a purpose being expressed here.

From John’s account, I take it that these words are not about Jesus’ death, but rather about his life. This is not just a merciful release from torture: it is the final deliberate action in the drama of a life accomplished. And it was by no means an easy life. The gospels testify to persistent hardship, starting with Jesus’ birth as a displaced person, his narrow escape from butchery at the hands of Herod, and his early life as a refugee. The account documents his arduous life as an itinerant preacher and healer, and the callous machinations of political and religious leaders in bringing about his execution.

But Jesus is now dying by crucifixion. Where is the accomplishment in this shameful ending?

Knowing that he is on a path that can only be accomplished through a brutal death, Jesus has nevertheless seen it through. You can visit the place remembered as the Upper Room in Jerusalem, can walk out through one of the gates in the city wall to the ancient olive grove of Gethsemane on the Mount of

Olives, and can follow the Roman road up the bluff to Caiaphas' house, where Jesus was dragged by the guards. I wonder if Jesus, wrestling at Gethsemane with the prospect of his forthcoming death, looked across the Kidron Valley to the shadowy Pinnacle of the Temple – the big drop-off from the edge of the Temple Mount – and remembered his rejection of easier options at the start of his ministry (Luke 4)? These are real places, and we have to understand that Gethsemane was a real temptation. But Jesus knew that there was no other way through, and he died as the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah, rather than following the road to power. As I listen to the news broadcasts, it seems that leaders all around the world are following the violent road to power, and Jesus' accomplishment in accepting death has never seemed more relevant. This has been a journey faithfully pursued day by day in steady communion with the Father. John says "bowing his head, He gave up his spirit", and we feel that these words signify a deliberate act of completion.

I take encouragement from this. The example of Jesus is not about how to die well, but how to live well – how to walk with God whatever happens. We know our own struggles and failed intentions, and our final moments are hardly likely to be monuments to triumphant victory. Perhaps in the end it will just be a relief to be through with it all. I find both the life and death of Jesus to be an unfailingly compelling example. If we walk steadily with God, we will be with God. With the help of the Father, we are in it for the long haul, and that will be a life accomplished.

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