

Good Friday – March 30, 2018

Refectio – John 19:30

*“So, when Jesus had received the sour wine,  
He said, ‘It is finished’, and gave up His Spirit.”*

“It is finished” – three words in English – one in Greek, “Teteletai,” - that contain the whole Gospel of the Atonement and beg three questions: “What is ‘it’?”; “What is ‘is’?” and, “What and how means, ‘finished’”.

Clearly, this is a facilitation for your continued meditation because nothing I say could ever begin to be an adequate engagement with even one of the dimensions of the Gospel of our Lord evoked by these words.

Best, perhaps, to start with the fact that the language must be understood as a triumphant declaration of completion – absolutely **not** a whimper of resignation when all resources have been exhausted, nor the finish of something banal or routine like a meal. The word in Greek – *teteletai* - beautifully captures the paradox in the title of Frederick Buechner’s classic, “The Magnificent Defeat.” – The dark savagery and hideous deformity of human sinfulness have had their way with the Crown Prince of Glory, and his life, as subject to the limited possibilities

of time and breath and space, has ended in spectacular defeat, but what is really finished is the reign of death and the powers of hell. In a way totally consistent with the magistral Son-of-God-Incarnate we meet in John's Gospel, the Christ in a single word takes authority over the issue of His life, the moment of His mortal death, and the instrument of His execution.

I offer three observations about what means "finished," the first as a kind of stage-set for the other two.

One of the greatest strengths of the liturgical churches is their careful observation of a yearly cycle of feasts and fasts within Seasons of Remembrance, of present encouragement and hopeful anticipation. There is, however, a shadow side to this defining strength. It is entirely possible for those high moments and Seasons to become walled compartments – cutting the great sweep of the Narrative of Salvation into small thematic rooms that are only linked in virtue of being within the traditional framework of the Christian Faith. In other words, a kind of picture is received as an assembly of parts rather than an undivided whole of which all elements are one, and each element holds all. I have seen this in my own faith journey and I have certainly seen it pastorally. (I would go so far as to say that the compartmentalization of specific features within a vast tapestry of meaning is a deepening and

dangerous affliction of post-modern times. *Decontextualization*, the illusion of control it confers and the spiritual myopia it incites, is always a mark of the damning delusion of pride.)

The point I want to make on this Good Friday is that the Nativity, the Passion and Easter, Pentecost and Trinity, are entirely, essentially of a piece. God's atoning work began in eternity past and continues seamlessly in the Person of the eternally begotten Son through the Incarnation, the Works, the Ministry of the Passion, the Cross, the ruptured Tomb, the Glorification, Ascension, the Ministry of the Church and so on into eternity-yet- to-be experienced. There is no question that in a unique way the Passion magnifies and starkly colours the heart of the Atonement. But Christ's Incarnation embodies the Atoning intention of the Father within a specific interval of our time-bound human history from the Annunciation to the moment His Spirit is surrendered to Father's care through death into Resurrection. Like a metaphysical rain-bow, the arch of the greatest story ever touches horizons beyond human vision.

So, two observations flow from this that are of deep personal significance for me and hopeful for you.

The Incarnate phase of the Atonement as recorded in the Gospels is made authentic for me in that Christ reflected in perfect balance what

one Christian writer has called “contrarities.” At His death on the cross, those unexampled, utterly amazing contrarities were consummated and resolved in the finality – *the finish* – of death. What that commentator is talking about when using the word “contrarities” to describe Christ – the One who is come in the flesh - are contrasts in self-expression that His divinity, His unwavering dedication to the Father’s will, enabled Him to hold in life-giving tension within His incarnate being , and then enact in the raw, concrete contingencies of daily human life. Just for example: He lived fully and with unclouded perception in the moment and yet foresaw and gave Himself willingly to an excruciating death; He drew children to Himself to touch and bless them, yet could confront the malice and devious aggression of the Jewish leaders with poised power and disarming insight; He ate and drank with outcasts and sinners – chose and kept intimate company with a ragtag band of plebeian disciples - and yet could overpower the doctors of the law with His resistless erudition about the traditions of the faith and the plan of salvation; He selectively disclosed Himself and revealed Himself; He wept over the destiny of deluded individuals and unrepentant cities and yet turned a couple of hundred gallons of water into the finest kind of wedding wine; He healed incurables and untouchables with a word or a touch and yet laid a knotted whipcord on the backs of the temple hucksters. What was finished on the cross,

as one of the awesome dimensions of the Incarnate drama, was a living tableau of perfectly balanced virtues of insight, attitude and action for all the seasons of the human experience.

Many years ago the Encyclopaedia Britannica referred to the “uninventable” Jesus. I know of no better way to describe the life that finished on Golgotha – that resolved through an appalling death into resurrection - than that. I know of no more compelling warrant for faith than such uninventibility. The Cross finishes the painting of an uninventible life of exploding colours that no act of imagination could ever have composed into a harmonic whole. Contrarities are uninventibly integrated in a heart of love for the World.

Finally, as most, if not all here would accept, at the enfleshment of the Christ, two natures were embodied in one person. The great Act of the Atonement drama that is “finished,” in the Word of Christ from the Cross is that mysterious, barely imaginable co-existence – better to say co-inherence, even though the word is more difficult - of a Divine Nature that could not sin and a fleshly will that was constantly subject to the temptations of the World, the inducements of the flesh and the blandishments of the devil. In one person something entirely beyond the limits of human invention happened: two natures had held together in a terrible tension and extremity of testing until the one had

been glorified with (with) the other in death. He has prevailed in all tests of allegiance to ultimate virtue, just where we so often deviate from the call of the Holy Spirit within our own lives in order to palliate the flesh. I think it impossible for the human imagination even to approach what it meant for the Second Person of the Holy Trinity to travel the road of human experience for decades while embodying, and perfectly aligning to the divine purpose, a human nature unalloyed from the mortal being of His mother with an inherent disposition to rebel, to resist, to evade, to deny, to do the right thing for the wrong reason, all in the self-protective and self-glorifying service of frail flesh.

So, my closing invitation is to contemplate, if you will, the exquisite tension implicit in holding, within one person, that human nature in dynamic, reciprocating co-inherence with the divine. Little wonder Islam refuses even to consider the possibility. Yet, for us Christians, so the Good Friday drama unfolds until ***“it is finished”*** - ***“TETELESTAI”*** - the terrible tension resolves in the most appalling ignominy unto death ***and, behold, the moment of total loss is transformed by love divine into the gateway to glory.*** “It is finished,” in this context could well be transposed, “it has only just begun.”

Victory is now assured, something like the inevitable outcome of World War II after the completion of the D Day landing and the liberation of Normandy. More blood and tears to flow, but what was finished was certain. Two fundamental revelations in the cross of Christ: a world of gross unfairness and death that is certainly finished as it totters into the abyss of eternal decay, and an eternally prevailing God-of- love- triumphant.

when, for instance, an objection was raised by influential, senior voices that an occasional celebrant of long experience used the first chapter of John's Gospel – "In the beginning was the Word . . ." – on Christmas Eve in a multi-point parish I served as Rector. The complaint took issue with the fact that the sermon had not been "Christmassy" enough.