

Words That Last Forever

“I Thirst.”

John 19:28

Epitaphs. Carved into stone, whittled into wood, burnished into bronze – they offer a tidy lasting message, readable long after bodies turn to dust and memories flicker and fade...

“Loving Mother, Faithful Wife.”

“Honest Man of Business.”:

“Suffer the Little Children to Come Unto Me.”

“Gave His Life in the Defense of His Country.”

“Abides Forever In Light.”

More than that – through poetry, Scripture and prose, epitaphs seek to sum up in one lasting package the life, the love, the work, the passion, the very purpose – of those for whom they stand.

Jesus Christ had no epitaph. Buried in a borrowed tomb, he had no words emblazoned on his grave. If there had been, what might they have read?

“Rabbi.”

“Beloved Son.”

“Hard-working Carpenter, Itinerant Preacher.”

“Healer.”

“Crucified, Died and Buried.”

“Enemy of The People.”

But Christ had no epitaph. Instead, during the final hours of his life, Christ mapped out his way of suffering with seven famous last words – seven final phrases, remembered and recited throughout the ages – tiny touchstones along his way of sorrows.

This Lent, as we gather to make sense out of his wretched suffering, his senseless death, our confusing lives, our miraculous relationship with him, we do so with these words as our guide.

He died alone, in a way and under circumstances that we will never understand. Yet these words provide tiny windows, tenuous glimpses into his suffering, loving, final thoughts. Listen to them. We may find that these last words have a lasting impact, even now, for us.

“I thirst,” he cried before he died. Short as it is, this word is significant, for in the Gospel of St. John, where this incident is recorded, our Lord is depicted, almost chapter by chapter, as one who had come to shake the thirst of others, indeed of all the world.

“I thirst,” he cried before he died, and there was nothing to offer him but bitter vinegar. The story of his ministry, however, began where there was water aplenty, not just to drink, but so much of it there that John the Baptist could declare, **“I BAPTIZE with water...”**

So much water that it need not be hoarded, but used for washing-that most wondrous and significant washing of all.

“I BAPTIZE with water...that he might be revealed to Israel...He baptizes with even more – the Holy Spirit,” lavishly bestowed-a-great outpouring of the grace of God.

But now he cries, **“I thirst.”** **“They have no wine,”** his mother said at Cana then, another kind of thirst. They did have water though-six stone jars each holding twenty of thirty gallons--and Jesus Christ, to use that abundance of water there, to make abundant wine.

Not bitter vinegar, but what was deemed the very best, that should have been served first.

And now He cries, **“I thirst.”**

Nicodemus, approaching stealthily at night, had another kind of thirst, a thirst for knowledge-maybe understanding, comprehension, answers to the puzzling. **“How can one be born again to inherit the Kingdom of God?”**

And Jesus spoke, as John had earlier, of water: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit” ...**

WATER...and the Spirit...both freely offered in abundance by the Son of Man, who now cries out in agony, “I thirst.” “Give me a drink,” he said then in Samaria at Jacob’s well, prelude to later words, **“I thirst.”**

But even in his asking, to shake his thirst, he offered more-abundantly: **“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... for the water that I give will become in one a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** A water of life. But now he cries,

“I thirst.”

At the poolside of Bethesda there was one poor soul who thirsted (in a way), who longed for water always just beyond his reach: “Sir,” he said to Jesus, “I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is troubled.” And there, beside the untroubled waters now... might we call them, with the psalmist, “still waters”?... Jesus gave abundantly.

And now he cries, **“I thirst.”**

He led them to the wilderness and fed them there, as God had fed his people there once long ago...and do we see a pattern growing here?... offered them abundantly more:

“I am the bread of life; those who come to me shall not hunger, and those who believe in me shall never thirst...Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.”

And now, indeed, with blood flowing freely, it is HE who cries **“I thirst.”**

Once he had made a lavish offer, a bold and generous invitation: “If any thirst, let them come to me and drink,” coupled with an equally bold and lavish promise: “The one who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of that person’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Water aplenty, offered in abundance, freely, flowingly, from one who cries, **“I thirst.”**

The blind man, like his crippled counterpart, was told to go and wash-water aplenty for his healing too, from one who cries out, **“I thirst”**

And then, the night before his crucifixion scene, there in the upper room, when others were reluctant to assume the role of servant he had come to take, Jesus himself arose from supper, laid aside his garments, girded himself with a towel, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples’ feet and to declare them clean.

Their feet (and ours) were washed by him whose feet are now spiked to a cross, from which he cries, **“I thirst.”**

He posed the awesome question in the garden then, in just this picture: “Shall I drink the cup which the Father has given me?” That cup, despite the offered vinegar, we see him drinking now, so thoroughly, so all-sufficiently, that still he cries, **“I thirst.”**

Till one more thing remains. When finally, his body hangs there broken for us all, a spear is used to pierce his side, that WE receive his blood as well...and with it, St John tells us reverently, **“water”!** The final, all-sufficient giving to the world of him who gave his all.

“I thirst.” He cried before he died, that **WE** may never thirst again.

“If any thirst, let them come to ME and drink!”