

THE WORK OF ATONEMENT COMPLETED

“When Jesus had received the vinegar, He said: it is finished; and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit”.

(John 19: 30)

Every time we gather on Good Friday to remember the death of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, I ask myself this question: what is the purpose of this service? Ought we to express our sadness at this death? Should we become emotional? Should we see and confess our sins more clearly than on any other day, and say: Lord, it was my sin that caused you so much grief?

That is how it is done in many churches. People are invited to go through the whole gamut of emotions which Christ must have experienced. The pope, as we have seen, travels the *via dolorosa*, the road of sorrows, to re-enact the suffering of Christ. In dramatic fashion the whole scene is imitated and repeated. And we may as well admit it, it is impressive to dramatize and emotionalize the suffering of the Lord. Is our remembrance not a bit meagre in comparison?

Well, we have always stressed that also in special worship services the Scriptures must be in the centre. So let us see from the Word of God how Christ died and what He accomplished with His death. We cannot fathom this death, nor will we dramatize and imitate it. Christ does not build His church through dramatic sensationalism but by the simple preaching of His Word.

POWERFUL PREACHING

We must understand, however, that such simple preaching is powerful and demanding. You can go and see a show, a re-enactment, and come away impressed by the scene and yet be unchanged. But the preaching of the Gospel cannot leave you indifferent. This Word must bring about not only a true love for Christ but also a sincere desire to serve Him as Lord and King.

For is His dying not a priestly act of atonement? Does He by His blood not *claim* us, purchase us, oblige us to enter a new life? Who can stand by to see Christ die and not be affected? He does one of two things on Golgotha: He saves us or curses us. Yes, it true for us also; either “it is finished” or it is not!

We concentrate now on these last words of Christ as recorded in the Gospel of John: “It is finished.” I know that after this He also said yet, “Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit.” But those words are not recorded in John 19. Here the emphasis is fully on the completion of Christ’s work of atonement. The Lamb of God, identified in John 1, brings the ultimate sacrifice of atonement. In looking at these last words, we will give attention to the necessary preparation for this proclamation, to its careful formulation, and to its definite confirmation.

VINEGAR OR WINE?

The text begins with the fact that Jesus received some “vinegar.” Now there has been a lot of discussion about this “vinegar,” about why it was given and whether it was a deepening of Christ’s suffering or not. It is clear from verse 25 that our Lord Himself asked for this vinegar.

He said: I thirst. A bowl of vinegar happened to be standing nearby, and so they dipped a sponge in the vinegar and lifted it up so that He could take some of the liquid. A sponge was in that situation more suitable than a cup.

From Psalm 69, “They also gave me gall as food to eat and vinegar as drink when I was thirsty,” it appears that indeed this type of drink was not pleasant. Just as “gall” is unbearably bitter, so vinegar is awfully sour. However, the word used here for “vinegar” is perhaps better to be understood as a very common and cheap wine which the soldiers and the people drank: very dry and sour like vinegar, but nevertheless a form of wine.

Then it may be said: it is sad that there is no cool and refreshing water, only this sour liquid, but at least it is some fluid, which may be of help to Christ. The fact that a sponge and hyssop were available suggests that all this was purposely provided for the benefit of the crucified, and the Lord makes use of this possibility.

WHY DRINK NOW?

We have to ask ourselves this question: why did the Lord Jesus avail Himself of the possibility to drink this sour wine? Why did He actually request something to drink? For it is clear that Christ earlier, just before the crucifixion itself, refused to drink any wine. We can read in Matthew 27: 34, “. . .they offered Him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when He tasted it, He would not drink it.” Then He wouldn’t drink, now He wants to drink! What is the reason?

The explainers are quite unified in their answer to this question. This wine mixed with gall was not refused by Christ because it tasted so awful, but because it contained a drug which would soften the pain of the crucifixion, some kind of anaesthetic. It was probably also offered to the others who were crucified with Him.

But the Lord did not in any way want His suffering softened through the administering of a pain killer. He would not have His senses dulled. He wanted to undergo the agony of the cross with a clear mind, in full consciousness, in order to experience fully in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. So when He had tasted what was offered to Him, and knew that it contained a powerful sedative, He refused to drink it. He would bear everything in His own strength and with a clear mind so that He might fully deliver us from the wrath of God.

That was three hours earlier. Christ has suffered in silence throughout these hours in the darkness of Golgotha. These were the hours that He underwent the agony of hell and was left by all, even by His heavenly Father. Then His heart was utterly broken, and in His inexpressible anguish He summoned all His energy and called out with a loud voice: My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?

Those words were spoken through parched lips. One of the greatest torments of a crucified person was *thirst*. The wounds had begun to fester during those hours. There was loss of blood. There was the rise of fever. The thirst was unbearable. Can you understand that wine was brought along to relieve some of the agony of those crucified?

FOR OUR BENEFIT

But we already saw that Christ does not in any way want His personal agony relieved. When He therefore asks for something to drink, it is not for His benefit, but for our benefit. This receiving of the “vinegar” leads immediately to a statement, yes, to a royal proclamation!

So we must conclude that Christ asked for something to drink only so that His final proclamation would be clearly heard by all. He wanted everyone to hear what He had to say before He died. He prepared Himself for His final proclamation as Saviour of His people. So unto the very end He was not busy with Himself, but focused on His Father and His people.

Christ wanted to speak out loudly and clearly. He would not die with a soft moan, with some unintelligible last words on His lips, but with a clear proclamation for all around to hear, a word that would from then on echo through the ages in the churches until the great day of His glorious return.

Often people die unprepared, and without having said what they might have wanted to say. Important last words are left unspoken. But this is not the case here. What must be said, will be said, loudly and clearly! For Christ remains to the very end the *chief prophet* of His church, and He consciously prepares Himself for the ultimate proclamation for our benefit today, so that we may know that in His suffering and death He has perfectly fulfilled the work of atonement.

FINISHED

We come, then, to the question: what exactly did Christ say as His final words? He said: it is finished. The Greek original has only one word: finished. Actually, it is a very simple word which at first glance does not even have such a deep ring to it. Just a statement of fact: it is finished. It even sounds somewhat abstract: *it* is finished, but what is “it”?

I would like you to notice the obvious fact that Jesus does not say “I have finished,” but “It is finished.” In other words, as one explainer suggests, there is here at the end of Christ’s life no self-justification, no self-glorifying, no speaking about Himself as if He is so important. Christ here formulates carefully, for in His speaking as the chief prophet He remains to the end the humble Servant of the LORD.

His last song is not one of self-exaltation. He does not shout: the record shows that I took the blow and did it my way. He says: I did it God’s way! He wants us to know that He did not in any way leave the path of obedience, not even in His last hours of agony on the cross, but that He stayed on the path which His Father had set out for Him. The record shows: He did it God’s way.

For that is what it means: it is finished. What is “it”? Well, the work of atonement, as prescribed in the Scriptures. Throughout the suffering of Christ on the cross, the Bible emphasizes that Christ did this or that in order to fulfill the Scriptures. “It is finished” refers to the divine counsel of redemption that in the

suffering of the Son of God, through His hellish agony, He would complete and perfect the work of atonement.

Christ tells us now: it is done. I have, according to God's will, according to His righteous law of atonement, satisfied His wrath and paid the price, I have gone through hell for you. He formulates this carefully and precisely, without any self-praise: it is done.

A NOTE OF TRIUMPH

Our Lord comes out of the agony and darkness of hell and may proclaim to us that the work of atonement has been perfectly completed. The price for sin has been paid in full. He pronounces this in all clarity and without any possibility of misunderstanding. Here already a note of triumph begins to ring. Here already the rays of Easter begin to filter through. No one can ever turn back the clock. Now there is forever a new situation. Now there is a legal basis, a final and eternal basis under the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins.

Before Jesus dies, He wants us all to know: it is finished, and therefore, have no more fear. Do not dwell on your sins anymore. Now you may draw out of the waters of God's unending grace, in unending faith, for the work of atonement is completed. It was done according to the Scriptures, in conformity to God's law. It is official and legal, binding and unchangeable. It is finished. It is an unmistakable and clear proclamation.

Now someone might say: yes, but does not Christ's dying and burial also belong to His work of atonement and humiliation? How can He say that it is finished when He still has to die? Is it not too soon to say that it is done? Well, indeed, in a strict sense, the dying of the Lord belongs to the work of atonement. It is the concluding act, indeed, and it will follow immediately.

But the point is that all that had to be done before He could die, was now done: His active work of obedience, His fulfilling of the law, His undergoing of the penalty of the law, His hellish agony. All that had to come first, before He could even think of dying. After undergoing spiritual death, He could enter into physical death. The rest was *done* unto Him by others. He took no active part in His burial. His last act was one of dying in the knowledge that all His work was finished.

NEVER FINISHED

Many people die before they feel that their earthly work is done. Christ was only a young man in His early thirties. People might have said: what a pity. What an unfulfilled life! So young, so un-finished. So much potential gone to waste. He could have done so much more.

Indeed, we can never say of ourselves that all our work is done. We do not determine this, the Lord God does. He calls us when He considers that we have completed our earthly task. We would have liked to continue, perhaps. Or maybe we become tired of life, old and worn-out, and would rather die. But we know that

only God can say about our life's work that "it is finished."

But here Christ says of His own work: finished. For He knows, with perfect divine and messianic clarity, that it *is* finished. Never was a task so well-done. Never was a job so perfectly finished. Even though people may stand around and scoff: what a failure, what an unfinished symphony, Christ says: no, it is finished, perfectly. And that means: now I can die, and I will die. With that proclamation and in that knowledge, He indeed does die, and thereby confirms that the work of atonement is finished.

CHRIST'S ACTUAL DYING

For let us look at how John then in this context describes Jesus' actual dying. He writes: and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. Do you know what this implies? Our Lord Himself chose the exact moment and manner of His dying. No one killed Him, He Himself died by laying down His life. And by laying down His life at that moment, He confirmed that the work of atonement was done. There was no more reason to live, no more reason to suffer. So now He may die at this precise moment.

The other two who were crucified along with Him could not make this choice, could not perform this act of dying when they wanted. They had to wait until all life slowly drained from them in the ensuing hours. Their legs had to be broken, so that they could no longer fight off suffocation and would have to give up the struggle.

But Christ had then already been dead for some time. We read in Mark 15: 44 that Pilate was surprised, when Joseph of Arimathea came to ask him if he was allowed to bury Jesus, that Jesus had died so soon. Pilate even asked the centurion to verify the death of the Lord.

Christ died when He wanted to, when He was ready for it. His dying was a royal act of completion. His earthly work was finished, and after He had proclaimed this, precisely at that moment, He died. Not one minute earlier, not one minute later. He died at the time which He chose.

That is how we may understand the words: He bowed His head. He physically gave up the struggle. He gave up His spirit. He let His life go from Him. He did this voluntarily, in obedience to the counsel of God. No one forced Him. No one took His life, He gave it Himself.

He had said this ahead of time. When He spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd who would give His life for the sheep (John 10), He stated plainly, "No one takes [my life] from Me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. . . ." No one takes it, but I give it, freely, voluntarily, when the moment has come.

His dying at that specific moment definitely confirmed the proclamation that His work was done. Christ suffered much. Christ suffered deeply, more so than any one of us will ever know. But He did not suffer needlessly. His suffering was not

cruelly prolonged without necessity. When His work was done, He died. He Himself laid down His life, to take it again on the appointed time, according to the Scriptures. He Himself put the finishing touch on His work, crowning it with His death.

Here you can see that He is also in His dying indeed the Son of God, our Mediator. No one took anything from Him, not even His life. He gave it all Himself. And so He confirmed the completion of God's counsel of redemption.

NO EULOGY REQUIRED

We can try to wax eloquent. We can try to eulogize with sweeping emotion. We can dramatize and sensationalize. But we can never come closer to the cross than through this text. Christ does not seek our eloquence or eulogies. He would be offended at our attempt to re-enact His incomprehensible suffering. All we must do is believe. And go on our way rejoicing, resolving to do what we must do in His service.

Now I may believe that my earthly task, too, will one day be finished perfectly, whether I die at a younger or older age. My work, my trials, my efforts are not vain in Christ. The unfinished symphony of my life finds its completion in Christ. So that one day, whenever God calls me, I can go to the Father in His Name, and say: He finished it, also for me, and in Him I am presented to God in holiness. Now I can live life and not fear death, for I know: it is finished in Him.

Thou Saviour, Thou hast ransomed us,
Hence we will honour and adore Thee
And cast in gratitude before Thee,
The crowns by grace bestowed on us (Hymn 22, *Book of Praise*).