

IT IS FINISHED - GOOD FRIDAY 2009

It is finished. These are the last words of the Lord Jesus on the cross. Just three words in English - IT IS FINISHED. I do not know what the Aramaic is but in Hebrew it is "ze gamur" TWO words, and in Greek it is "tetelestio" One word.

Whatever language we think of, this is a short sentence - a simply amazing sentence. These words have been called: The Greatest Words Ever Uttered By the Greatest Man That Ever Lived.

Here we have the consummation, the completion and fulfilment of the whole of the Old Testament - all the preparation that led up to Jesus. I don't believe that ever in history, anywhere, at any time, by anybody, were words more pregnant with meaning than these words given by one Man at the end of His life - It is finished. It is finished.

This is a cry - not of defeat, but of victory. It is not, as some have suggested, a cry of relief that it is nearly done, that he is off the hook. One meditation I have seen says this:

What a sigh of relief! What a cry of deliverance, that finally, after seemingly endless pain and gasping torment, it is over at last. The suffering is ended. The ordeal is finished and nothing remains but the blessed peace of the absence of all sensation.

But it cannot be that. Surely? Or not *just* that. Of course that agony is nearly done. The life is slipping away. Perhaps when the pain becomes so intense you cannot even feel it - the brain sort of shuts down. But he could have ended his life with a groan. That is in effect what Mark and Luke say: "he breathed his last." But John was there. He heard what was said.

Mind you, it was not a not a **shout** - every translation of John puts it simply: Jesus **said**: It is finished. It should have been a great shout - it was, after all a cry of victory. But Jesus did not have the energy, the force left in him to shout. Matthew records it as a shout, but as far as we know he wasn't there. John was.

Yes, he shouted earlier in desperation: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" That was earlier on. He was still fighting the great pain. And in the middle of that red mist, he felt that his father's comforting presence that had been with him, close to him since his baptism. It was gone. Some say that God could not bear to look at the sin - and the evil that was collected on that cross. He hid his face from it - as the psalmist would say, and for the very first time Jesus knew the absence of God. What Thomas a Kempis called the "Dark Night of the soul" - the absence of God - absence of any sense of God's presence.

When Jesus felt totally alone, lifted up as an object of ridicule, a barbarous warning to all who would take on the might of Rome, the great shout was wrenched from him. Why - God - why?

But it is finished - it could almost have been a whisper. Ze - - -gamur.

What was finished? What was the victory? In one sense, Jesus' personal victory had been won the night before. In the olive grove, in the dark he took control of his fear. Yes I did say fear. I believe that Jesus was literally terrified of what lay ahead. We read that he sweated like great drops of blood. This is one of the signs of terror. But he screwed his courage up. He got up, he said: Put your sword down. And he went with Judas and the Temple Guards, without a fight. Willingly.

He puts up with the abuse. He is slapped and scorned, lowered into the holding pit overnight, dark, alone, afraid. Then hauled out of it, no food or drink - he is not worth that - and he is sent to Pilate - to Herod - back to Pilate again. He is then flogged with a lash with metal shards in the throngs - designed to rip open the flesh to the bone. The shock is enough to kill you. Then he has to walk, simply covered in blood, nearly a mile through the streets and down outside the city wall, and up the little mound to the cross roads, so that he can be crucified where the most people can see him. All those coming in for Passover. All those good Jews whose leaders had put him there. For envy. For fear of losing their income, their control.

He has to bear the weight of wood. A full size cross is truly heavy. I got one made; it is in All Saints. I could only carry it from the Gate to the Screen. I could not have done more. Possibly Jesus only had to carry the cross member. In his state that would have been heavy enough. But since the soldiers had to get someone to help him I think it was the whole cross, vertical and horizontal. The weight of the world.

He had to lie on that cross. I don't suppose they laid him gently down. We talk of a bed of pain - but this? One man held his hand so that the nail could be beaten through his wrist. Then the other. Then the feet. The legs wrenched round and the spike driven through the heels. A tomb has been found where the heel bones were still nailed together. We do know how it was done.

Then the cross was tipped up to horizontal and the searing pain redoubled as he had to take his own weight on these living wounds. And a thud as it dropped down into the deep socket - two feet perhaps?

It is finished? The pain is over? Was it all that which Jesus meant? Well may be - but much more. Another writer says this:

"It is finished." Once, these final words of Jesus were considered a confident expression of a task completed, something like, "OK, Father, I have fulfilled your will." It was as if Jesus felt that God wanted him to be crucified. But we should no longer understand these words this way. God is not a masochistic God who wants his son, or anyone else, to suffer. These are the dying words of a man too spent to continue, a human rag wrung out and left hanging in the breeze. They are not the words of a man suffering in order to fulfill God's will.

They reveal a far more real and challenging Jesus, for he is a Jesus much like us. God's will for him (and for us) was not that he suffer, but that he live with faith, hope, and

integrity. Because he lived that way, he was crucified by a world that could not face the power of that integrity. And so, at the end, Jesus says in agony, "I can no longer go on, Father; I am finished."

Richard Wood goes on: This understanding is vital if we are to follow Jesus authentically. For when we despair we do not usually feel secure in having done God's will. We feel only the darkness and the narrow confines of our world and our sinfulness closing in upon us. That is why we lose hope.

At such moments, the dashed hopes of Jesus on the cross can come alive. He did not simply dance through life, always the confident one, any more than we do. On the cross, he shares our agony, our darkest moments. He offers our fears, along with his own, to God and gives us the faith to go forward. We need only accept this gift.

In such times of insecurity, God does not ask us to pretend that all is well, that we have it all together. Instead, God beckons us to feel the oppressive blackness and even to have faith in grace. Jesus invites us to continue even when all seems truly lost, trusting him to break open the most tightly-closed spaces of our lives.

I am finished. I cannot go on. Yet God carries us forward. This is our faith in the darkest of times, the bleakest of days. And as God carries us forward, we are nurtured until we can walk in the light once again.

I can understand this reading of Jesus last words. And there is a lot there that rings bells with me - but there has to be more. I still feel that Jesus is saying something final, something that is an assertion that what he had set out to do is accomplished.

I believe he saw his task as showing the love and truth of God to the end. He looked down the barrel of the gun and said: "Go on world do your worst. I have finished what I started. I may not have got it right, but I was true to myself. I have overcome my fear. I have lived - I have loved."

But Jesus' words are more than just welcoming the ending of pain, they are much more than joy at the deliverance death brings. He does not merely say, "it is over" he says, "it is accomplished, fulfilled, achieved".

Jesus's words are not a cry of defeat and despair, these are words of success and triumph - even at the moment of death. The race has been run that he has endured to the end that the strife is over and the battle is won.

Yes, Jesus' last words are a cry of relief to be sure but also a cry of victory:

"The work I came to do is complete" there is nothing more to add "it is finished"

It seems to me that here is a terminus in the life of the Lord Jesus: all the prophecies, all the law, all the prophets, terminate in this saying of the Lord Jesus Christ. And everything from here blossoms out because this is the beginning of it all. Three simple words - it is finished.

On that mound, just outside Jerusalem this man, the Son of God, was nailed to a cross. It was

there that he suffered and died - that we might have eternal life - life to the full. Through the cross God sanctified wood and nails, absurdity and helplessness, making them sacraments of his loving kindness.

Yes - it is finished. But it is also begun - and we shall see the power of this work as the tomb cannot hold him. Life - life to the full - begins here.