

Week 9: “It is finished”

As we near the end of the current series, *Images of Christ – The Way of the Cross*, we encounter the final words of Jesus from the cross, “*It is finished*” (John 19:30). In order to understand the context and meaning of these words, let’s look at John’s gospel. John 19:28 situates these words after Jesus says, “*when Jesus knew all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture) ‘I am thirsty.’*” John’s words about the fulfillment of scripture refer to Psalm 69:21, “*They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*” The Synoptic Gospels all mention giving Jesus vinegar or sour wine to drink, but only John’s gospel contains Jesus’ words about thirst that place him in direct dialogue with Psalm 69.

Prior to Jesus’ crucifixion, Psalm 69 appears in several places in John’s gospel. For example, in John 2:17, when Jesus expelled the moneychangers from the temple, he said, “*zeal for your house has consumed me*” (Ps. 69:9a). These words reveal Jesus’ lament over the manner in which the concern for money and profit had twisted the understanding of worship, forgiveness and service for those in need. In John 15:18-27, Jesus also spoke of the world’s hatred of himself and his followers, saying, “*They hated me without a cause*” (Ps. 69:4b). Following this, Jesus then promised to send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who would testify to his followers, encouraging them in their own witness to God’s work (Jn. 15:26-27).

Psalm 69 is a psalm of lament in which the Psalmist asks God for deliverance from suffering. The Psalmist speaks of having no foothold in the world, of bearing reproach and becoming a stranger to his kindred, of looking for pity and comforters and finding none. Yet Psalm 69 concludes with steadfast faith in God amidst suffering, “*Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds*” (Ps. 69:32-33). John clearly places Jesus and his suffering in this tradition of lament and trust in God’s presence and salvation.

After Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “*It is finished,*” then bowed his head and gave up his spirit. What did Jesus mean by the words, “*It is finished*”? In Greek, the verb *tetelestai*



(Τετέλεσται) can also be translated as “it is completed” or “it has been accomplished.” *Tetelestai* means completion of work that will never need additional work. Jesus’ words mean that in the cross his work is now complete and the way to resurrection opened. The cross completes the way to resurrection and new life.

The image of Christ to the left, is a painting by Graham Sutherland, titled “*The Crucifixion*” (1946), and was influenced by Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, as well as by early photographs of Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In the mid-1940s Sutherland had been commissioned by St. Matthews Church in Northampton, England

to paint the crucifixion, and these influences led to his painting the suffering of the cross in a manner addressing the human condition in the postwar era. For Sutherland, the crucifixion was not simply an historical event, but rather the present reality of God's steadfast love for and ongoing suffering with sinful humanity and those oppressed by human sinfulness.

Rather than beautifying the human form, as had often been done in classical paintings of Christ, Sutherland distorted the human figure to represent what happens in crucifixion as well as suggesting God's presence with all who undergo human cruelty and suffering. Just as Grünewald had painted Christ crucified by depicting him bearing the physical sores of victims of the Plague, Sutherland portrayed Christ suffering violence in the modern world. Sutherland understood that the cross and its meaning need to be contextualized anew so that humanity might identify themselves and their neighbor with Christ's suffering on the cross.



The second image this week is the well-known painting by Salvador Dalí, "*Christ of St. John of the Cross*" (1951). Dalí was also influenced by another historical work, a sketch by St. John of the Cross portraying Christ at the moment he bowed his head. Dalí also used the same perspective on the cross, "from above," that St. John's sketch had used. Dalí also created a visual triangle between Christ's outstretched arms and legs, suggesting the Trinity in which the Father and the Son share all things with the promise of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself is portrayed as the center and means by which the universality of the messianic event is revealed and completed on the cross.

In an essay titled "After Ten Years," written in 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer looking back upon ten years of Nazi power, wrote, "We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer" ("Prologue" *Letters and Papers*). Bonhoeffer's image points to a perspective on the cross, viewed "from below," and

seeing that, in Christ, God suffers with humanity. Dalí's painting of the crucifixion adds the perspective "from above" by pointing to the finality of the cross as the self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus. Both images of "below" and "above" are necessary to grasp the humanity and divinity of Christ.

Jesus' words "*It is finished*" reveal the cross as the fulfillment of God's love and ongoing redemption of human suffering. Both paintings encourage the viewer to engage the meaning of scripture amidst the brokenness of the modern world. In Christ, human suffering and sinfulness have been taken up into God's steadfast love, forgiveness and healing. The cross opens the way to resurrection, as both a present reality and future hope, encouraging humanity to journey on the way of the cross by living with compassion while suffering for others. Amen.