



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Friday, April 2, 2010**  
*Good Friday*

*The Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday*  
*at 5:30pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin  
on  
John 19:1-37

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*“I THIRST”*

In Saint John’s Passion, the next to last thing Jesus says is “I thirst.” Why?

We may not think much about thirst as part of the anguish of crucifixion. What is thirst, after all, over against the torturous pain of nails into nerve and bone, and the agony of suffocating under one’s own weight, only to be stabbed again by the pain as one pushes up to breathe? Yet the victim is exposed and, just so, dehydrating. There is a tradition that Jesus prayed Psalm 22 as he hung on the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Later in that psalm there is a description of dying from thirst: My mouth is “dried up like a potsherd, my tongue cleaveth to my gums” (22:16 [BCP 22:15]). Jesus is assuredly thirsty, and he is about to die; does his cry, “I thirst,” have to do with the pain of his death?

It can be awful to be thirsty, even in the minor inconveniences that sometimes come upon pampered moderns like us. If you are fortunate to enjoy health care, you may have undergone what the medical profession delicately describes as “procedures” in preparation for which we are not allowed to drink anything after midnight. I arrive at the dutiful hour for my procedure, and the cheery attendant asks how I am, and I say, “I thirst.” And thirst may indeed come upon us at the end, when it could be we will be unable to take either solid or liquid into our body. Should we be so fortunate as not to die alone, a friend may be there to place a sliver of ice to our cracked lips. Is Jesus talking about an experience like that when he says “I thirst”?

How shall we think of the end of Jesus? It seems that all friendship has abandoned him, that all the powers of the hostile world have converged to destroy him. He seems completely passive to, and the full recipient of, every cruel thing ever done. It all comes upon him, and squoosh, like an unwanted small animal under the jackboot of Rome, he dies and out comes the gunk from his guts. Resurrection does follow, and that’s good news; but his death seems all bad, something inflicted upon him. Does Jesus say “I thirst” because of what is being done to him?

I think that’s true on one level, but there is more to be said. Saint John reminds us of the deep truth of what happened. Jesus was, he shows us, *in no way* passive to his death. Remember Pilate? Pilate returns from the baying crowd to re-interrogate Jesus, but Jesus is simply silent—until he calmly informs that official of empire that he would have no authority over him were it not given to him from above. Pilate fearfully intuits that Jesus is strangely in charge. Similarly concerning the words from the cross, Jesus speaks them with full knowledge and deliberate

purpose. Quote: “Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), ‘I thirst.’ ” This is not thirst inflicted upon Jesus, the passive sufferer. Can we make sense of Jesus’ thirst being the fulfilment of all things, indeed (as John also says) the fulfilment of scripture?

It is the fulfilment of scripture as a whole. Jesus came to do his Father’s will, which was to give life and love to a world of death and hate. “So God loved the world, that he gave his only Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). When he came close to his final Passover, “Jesus knew that his hour had come . . . that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God” (13:1,3). He knew he would lay down his life—not that it would be taken away from him. Jesus *allows* himself to be crucified, *allows* his body to come to its end, for a very profound reason. That reason is that *all his life* he has *thirsted* to do this, his Father’s will. Does Jesus regret the cup that is given to him, does he wish that it pass him by? Not the Jesus we see on John’s Good Friday. This Jesus, when arrested last night, commanded Peter to sheathe his sword. “Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?”

From beginning to end Jesus has thirsted to do his Father’s will. To the very end, he thirsts to drink the cup his Father gives him, and when he has drunk it, all things are finished.

I suppose there remains to us, here at the end, only to try to discern what it is that we thirst for on this Good Friday. What is the thirst of my life, what is it that I will thirst for all the way to the end? Within today’s liturgy, we remember Jesus’ death, we in fact give thanks for and even worship the means of his death (the cross), and we pray in the most serious way for all the concerns of the church and the world. Do I thirst to remember and know and understand Jesus? Do I long for that kind of purity of intention that gives focus and purpose to a life all the way to the end? Do I yearn to be one with Jesus? Do I thirst to pray, to find my arms somehow within Jesus’ arms, upholding and stretching out to the needs and real hungers of the world? When I come to my end, when the Lord passes the cup to me, will I be able to say his words? Will I say “I thirst”?

The answers to all these questions can be yes. All these things can be true for us. Because on this day a great triumph was won. The cup that Jesus thirsted to drink was drunk to the end. The Father’s will was done. It is a good Friday.