

Maundy Thursday - It is Finished

You might be wondering why we sang a Christmas song tonight, when our reading is about the cross. Sometimes sentimentality gets the better of us at Christmas. We just see the baby in the manger and the donkey, and the young parents...the shepherds and angels.

I picked it because tonight, we have come full circle. There, on the cross, Jesus says It is finished. It is finished means more than just that Jesus dies.

It is finished means we have come back around to what began with Jesus' birth. What began the night of Jesus' birth here reaches its completion...its fulfillment.

Of the Father's Love Begotten and What Child is This I think are the best hymns for John's view of Jesus' birth. What Child is This probably captures it in a more straightforward, if slightly less transcendent way. "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me for you; hail, hail, the Word made flesh, the babe the son of Mary."

On Christmas, we don't always want to think about the nails and the spear. Here, we have no choice. It was always going to come to this, because for God to become incarnate – for God to become flesh – was always going to mean to die. Because that's what happens to all of us.

The particular death Jesus died had to do with his mission on earth. But accepting death as part of being human was always going to be part of that commitment to incarnation.

So, what is it that's finished here? I mean the story isn't over yet, right? There is still the resurrection to come. That is where Jesus is fully revealed, not just as another failed Messiah, but truly God, now victorious over death.

There is still the bestowing of the Holy Spirit and there's still the ascension to come. Those are the places where the earthly mission of Jesus is passed on to the church...to us.

But what actually happened here, and how does it help us?

To talk about that, we do have to address sin. But you will find nothing in the gospels to support the idea that Jesus died to appease a wrathful god who demanded a blood sacrifice. What you will find is a God who loved the world so much that he was willing to die to set that world free. And that meant taking the full brunt of sin's effects on Jesus' body.

What you will also find, especially in John's gospel and the writings of Paul, is a clash between God and the God way of life on the one hand and the powers of evil that operate in our world

on the other. Sin is less about a list of things we've done wrong, and more about how those powers keep us captive...forces both within us and outside of us.

On Palm Sunday, we talked about the different kinds of kingdoms and different kinds of kings. The kings that have so often ruled on earth have ruled by power over others and violence and oppressive systems. Those systems bind everyone – including those who are actually in power.

Jesus let those oppressive powers do their worst to him. Bound to the world by the same flesh we all are, he willingly let the powers of evil put him to death. And when he went willingly to his death, he exhausted the power of evil and death. He said to Pontius Pilate, you have no power over me. I choose my path. With that, Pilate's hand is trumped.

In John's gospel, Jesus doesn't die on the day of Passover like he does in the other gospels. He dies the day before – the day of preparation. To some extent, that doesn't matter too much. Jesus himself placed his death at the time of Passover for a very specific reason. Passover was equated with freedom.

The day of preparation is the day the lambs to be used for Passover are to be slaughtered. The way John tells the story makes it crystal clear that Jesus is now that Passover lamb. So let's think about Passover and that lamb.

When God was preparing to lead Moses and Israel out of slavery, the 10th plague...the death of the firstborn was visited upon Egypt.

The plague would finally get Pharaoh to relent and let the people go. Before the night of death, the Hebrews were to slaughter a lamb and smear its blood over their doorways.

The plague of death would then pass over the homes with the lamb's blood.

That event...that plague on Egypt then opened the way to freedom for Israel. The placement of Jesus' death at Passover, and particularly at the time the lambs were to be slaughtered makes it clear that Jesus' death is about freedom. It's about freedom from the powers of evil that enslave God's good creation...the powers that enslave us.

That freedom itself is won when Jesus willingly confronts the powers of evil and lets them kill him. It's in that sense Jesus died in our place – not to appease an angry god but to take away the power of a violent and bloodthirsty world that seeks to bring death to all creation. The cross was born for me...for you...to break the chains of evil and death.

This is a cosmic battle that we can at best only understand vaguely. How it helps us is hinted at at the end of this scene. Jesus gave up his spirit.

In his farewell discourse, Jesus said his death was necessary so that the Holy Spirit could come and dwell with all of us. It won't be until the Sunday after Easter that we'll get John's version of Pentecost. But the hint is there tonight – Jesus gave up his spirit. Just as he gave up his body.

There is a certain logical progression – Jesus became God in the flesh and in doing so, joined human and divine, heaven and earth in his body. The forces of evil think they can beat him. But they can't. And the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell with us and in us is how Jesus' mission takes shape in us. That mission of the Holy Spirit will save us...and through us it will bring salvation to the world. The Holy Spirit...in us...now joins human and divine, heaven and earth...in our bodies.

But logic only gets us so far. There will always be an element of mystery in all this...in incarnation...crucifixion...resurrection...ascension...the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the end, we can really only stand with Mary and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. We stand, in awe...and in faith...because it's hard to do much else.