

February Cell Group Teaching
Reflections on the Last Seven Words of Christ
Word Five: Suffering
"I am Thirsty" (Jn 19: 28)

Lectio Divina: John 19: 28-29

In the previous four words, Christ was speaking to others while He interceded on our behalf. For the first time, we hear Christ speaking of Himself. On a personal note, these are for me among the saddest lines in Scripture. We can only imagine how difficult the previous 24 hours were before the crucifixion. Not only were there emotional trials (being abandoned and denied by those closest to Him not to mention the ridicule He endured when he appeared before the Sanhedrin and Herod) Jesus also endured an unimaginable amount of physical suffering as well. First there was the scourging, then the King of Kings was crowned with a crown of thorns. He then had to drag the Cross to Golgotha where His hands and feet were perceived with nails. Once nailed to the Cross the suffering began as His beaten and bloodied body succumbed to the tortures of crucifixion. As some may know, crucifixion was the a fate reserved for non-Roman citizens. This particular form of torture (from where we derive the word excruciating) was a slow and painful way to die. A person who was crucified would have died from either blood lose or asphyxiation as the weight of their bodies slowly compressed against their rib cadges. A small footrest was placed underneath the nailed feet to provide some painful support in order to prolong the inevitable which could have taken several days. Christ's sufferings however lasted only about three hours which speaks to the emotional and physical trauma He endured after His arrest in the Garden. The Gospels do not record how Our Lord responded to the various torments He faced. It is only here at the fifth word that Jesus vocalizes his physical state: He is thirsty. For the first time, we hear Him—in His own words—speak of how He felt after all He had endured. It is here that we see Christ at his most vulnerable. Jesus who was fully Human and fully Divine was nailed to a Cross from which He could have easily freed Himself. Yet Christ chose to remain on the Cross to atone for our sins. After all He had been through since Holy Thursday Jesus only vocalizes His thirst.

At first Jesus is offered myrrh which would have dulled a little bit of the pain. If this sounds a little familiar we can recall that not too long ago we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany when Jesus was visited by the Wise Men and offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Christ refused the myrrh and was then offered vinegar (or the sour wine of the Roman soldiers). Here we can be reminded of Jesus' first miracle at the Wedding Feast at Cana. He turned the water to wine, yet did nothing to satisfy His own thirst. As Fulton Sheen wrote: "[i]t is not surprising that He thirsted; what was surprising was that He said so. He who threw the stars into their orbits and spheres into space, He Who shut up the sea with doors, He Who made all the seas and rivers and fountains, He Who said to the woman of Samaria: 'The man who drinks the water I give will not know thirst any more' now let fall from His lips the shortest of the seven cries from the Cross." It is important to pause here and ask why exactly did Jesus ask for a drink? It wasn't solely for need, though that was most certainly part of it. The real reason was to fulfill scripture. Lets go back a little bit in the scripture passage: "And now Jesus knew that all was achieved which the scripture demanded for its accomplishment; And He said, I am thirsty." A key passage for this fulfillment is found in Psalm 21:16; Psalm 68:21-22:

Parched is my throat, like dry clay in the baking, and my tongue sticks fast in my mouth...I look for pity, there pity is none, For comfort, where there is no comfort to be found. They gave me gall to eat, and when I was thirsty they gave me vinegar to drink.

The vinegar was given on a branch of hyssop, which has some deeper significance. Hyssop (a plant that grows about a foot and half tall) was also used to sprinkle the lintel and posts with blood in Egypt to avoid the final plague during the Passover. Fulton Sheen noted that since the Roman soldiers offered Christ the vinegar on hyssop they were most likely mocking Jewish rites. Can any of you relate to being mocked? I'm assuming we've all been thirsty at some point? These questions speak to the wider implications of Christ fulfilling scripture. He suffered and died for our sins, but being both fully human (as well as being fully divine) He also had a physical body that went through physical suffering and pain. He had emotions that were affected by the mockery. There is nothing we go through in our lives that Christ did not also experience. He felt the sorrow and wept at the death of His friend Lazarus. He knew what physical pain and suffering was like. He knew what it felt till to be ridiculed and abandoned. I close with a reflection from James Martin:

“So when you pray, you are praying not simply to someone who understands you because he is all knowing, all loving, and all compassionate. You're also praying to someone who understands you because *he went through* what you are going through. And God *wants* you to pray to him. God desires a relationship with you. So much so that God came down to earth and suffered physically for you. That's one reason God comes to us—to help us to be in relationship with him. God wants that so much. God, you could say, thirsts for it.”

Questions for Discussion:

What do understand by the phrase “unite for sufferings to Christ Crucified”?

What does it mean to “offer up” our sufferings?

Do you view God as one who understands our sufferings? If so, why? If not, how come?