

Each of you here tonight is to be commended. Even though you will be richly rewarded with your hearing of “the Crucifixion” Cantata, still it’s not easy to choose to put yourself in this place where you freely enter into the darkness of the cross. It’s a lot easier to bypass the shadow of Good Friday and simply show up to join in celebrating the triumph and the glory of the Day of Resurrection on the third day. But each of you here tonight knows that’s not how it works. It cannot work that way.

I am grateful that Rodger and our choir will so ably draw us into the pathos of the Crucifixion. Their drawing us in is a lot more bearable than being drawn in by, say, Mel Gibson’s “Passion of the Christ”. (I watched that, reluctantly, when it was released. Once was enough. But there’s no way around it: Jesus dying on the cross was horrible beyond words—and more than any movie could make it seem. If ever we forget that horror, we miss a lot of the significance of it all.

In John’s Gospel, at the height—or utter depth—of this horror, with His very last breath, Jesus says “It is finished.” It raises one question, doesn’t it: What, exactly, is it that He has finished?

What we heard from John helps explain for us exactly what it is Jesus finished. Jesus was sentenced by Pilate at the exact minute—high noon on the day of Preparation for the Passover—that the priests were beginning to ritually slaughter some 200,000 lambs in the temple just a few blocks away. (John had identified Jesus as the one Lamb of God, with a capital “L”, back in chapter one).

Exodus tells us how, just as Moses had finished putting together the portable temple (the “tabernacle”) which the Israelites hauled around the desert as a place they understood God to dwell and they could meet with Him, Moses’ work was finished. And the cloud of the presence of the glory of God was so thick and glorious inside it, Moses couldn’t stand to stay in there any longer. [Ex. 40:33]

We just heard that Jesus cried out from the cross, “I am thirsty.” Of course He was thirsty—He had had a very rough day. But He was not calling out for Gatorade, or for anything to slake His biological thirst. He had already explained, “[I must] drink the cup the Father has given Me”. [18:11] For that He was thirsting. There on the cross, He drank it down, to the full, every drop. He finished it—the cup of suffering.

In fact, Jesus has already told us back in chapter 4 what He came to earth to do: He says His God-assignment is to “finish His Father’s work” [John 4:34].

This is what He finished, what He told the world with His dying gasp.

Jesus had come freely to show the world the costly, redeeming love of God. God could have stayed safely out of harm’s way, in the highest reaches of heaven, and simply watched us do ourselves in. (A thousand years before, God had temporarily come to dwell in a portable temple in the desert). But in Jesus, God came to earth to reside in Him (“in Him the fullness of deity dwelt in bodily form”) and then, through Jesus, the living Word, to live in you and me. The need for us to live as if God doesn’t care about us, or remains far away, is finished.

Jesus had come freely, unto His last breath, to show the world the costly, redeeming love of God. Jesus was seen as the one Lamb of God. That need for that endless procession of slaughtered lambs through the centuries to shed their blood to be put to death is finished.

I know that every one of us moderns has trouble hearing the Biblical language about God coming to us in the Son to give Himself as a sacrifice. Of course this imagery of blood sacrifice sounds barbaric and primitive and crude to our ears today. If this imagery pushes you further away from the reality of God's loving you so much He is willing to come to earth in Jesus to show you that costly, redeeming love, then don't linger on it. (But do remember that all the world practiced human or animal blood sacrifice until Jesus came, and in many places, believe it or not, both are still going on. It is only the utter triumph of the work Jesus did and the Way He showed His followers which now reveals, at least to the West, what a petty, cruel thing it is to sacrifice or harm in any way innocent animals—and how misguided were religions which persisted in it. In other words, if today we think blood sacrifice is cruel and strange and quaint, that, too, is due to the work which Jesus finished.)

But here's the thing. When any wrong has been done, any relationship has been broken, someone has to pay a price to restore it. When there's any love, there's a price to be paid. Maybe we could call that a "sacrifice" which is the price of love. If your spouse is unfaithful, hearing the word "Sorry" is just not going to do it. If you are to be reconciled, and the marriage redeemed, someone needs to pay a price: the willingness not to hold a grudge or pay back in kind; the willingness to trust again, the willingness to change behavior. Every kind of love requires sacrifice. When you love your a baby, who becomes a child, you are paying a price with each midnight nursing, with each repetition of "A,B,C,D,E,F, G..." until you're ready to go crazy. Then they become teenagers... and you get to understand "sacrifice" in yet more costly ways.

The reality is that Pilate is not the only coward who sold out Jesus—nor were Peter and Judas. The reality is that humanity was doing itself in during the time of Jesus just as it had been in the time of Moses. Just as we do today. Every one of us, to one degree or other, has separated ourself from God and from others. Has gone our own way. Has sold out Jesus and the Kingdom He came to introduce. Every one of us has harbored ruinous thoughts toward even our loved ones. Every one of us has sabotaged our own dreams and hopes and lives. Has treated others unkindly. Has not been the change we want to see in the world. Every one of us has contributed to the brokenness of the world. It is finished, our need to keep acting out in ways that hurt ourselves and others.

We are horrified by the thought of Jesus dying on the cross. You may not think you're worth it, or, if you're honest, that you really need it. (Really, Jesus—not for my sake... don't go to the trouble...) But this is the point—exactly what Jesus came to show. Sin is really serious, and really costly to somebody. Maybe it's another symptom of our age that we have become so indifferent, so morally mediocre, that we no longer understand how costly is sin to a holy God who loves us so much.

A look at the cross helps me to understand again. Look at the cross. God loves you this much.

Jesus' work, to show you how much God loves you, is finished. Your work, to trust in His love and to live accordingly, is now and always just beginning.