

“I Am Thirsty” John 19:28-29©
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INTRODUCTION (1:30 to 1:50)

John 19:28-29 reads:

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

“I am thirsty,” Jesus said at the end. Three words, and then three more “It is finished.” And then Jesus died. Yet these six words in two simple sentences are full of meaning.

NOT A NATURAL THIRST

“When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), ‘I am thirsty.’”

That is a curious verse. There is something more here than Jesus being thirsty for a drink of water. We are told by the author of John that Jesus said that he was thirsty to fulfill scripture—not because, as a natural consequence of crucifixion, he was dehydrated and needed water. No there is something more here.

Then instead of water he was given vinegar, not even wine but vinegar—sour wine.

What scripture was fulfilled? Here, cross-references point to two Psalms—the 22nd and the 69th Psalms.

Psalm 69 says, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” and Psalm 22 says, “ My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.” Yet when we read these Psalms in their entirety, they do not contain prophecies that require fulfilling like those of the Hebrew, Old Testament, prophets that predict some future event or condition. These Psalms are laments about how poorly the psalmist is being treated by life in general and enemies in particular, and they are pleas to God for relief. They don’t predict the future. Certainly they describe Jesus’ condition at the time of his crucifixion, but these two Psalms don’t contain something that needs to be fulfilled. So what’s going on here?

A THIRST FOR HEAVEN

The Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the most accomplished preachers in the English speaking world and an Episcopalian minister, wrote a sermon about this verse, “I am thirsty,” She thinks that Jesus, as portrayed in John, endures his ordeal with grace and dignity knowing, ahead of time, what will happen next in this unfolding drama. According to the author of John, Jesus is not a mere mortal who simply thirsts but the Son of God who asks for a drink to fulfill scripture. It is as if Jesus were an actor in this play. He has read the script, and knows what is going to happen next. He sees the vinegar and knows what is his next line and knows that those there will give him vinegar, because the divine script has already been written long ago at the beginning of time.

In this unfolding drama of the end, then Jesus dies and continues like an actor after the play is over who changes out of his costume, drops the character, walks out of the theater, and continues his life as who he truly is—as Christ!

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that the Jesus, who is dying on the cross, does thirst, but it is a different kind of thirst. This is the Jesus who brought the living waters of the spirit of God, this is the Jesus who turned water into wine and who stilled the raging seas, who now finds himself in a dry and desolate place—where all he gets for his thirst is sourness on a stick! What Jesus then is thirsty for, in Barbara Brown Taylor’s words, “is heaven. He is thirsty for reunion with God, and there is only one way he knows how to get there. ‘Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?’ ‘I am thirsty’ is what he says, but what he means is, ‘I am ready.’”¹

A THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

I hope that sense of Jesus being thirsty for heaven and ready for his reunion with God gives some here comfort. Yet there is even more here than that. To articulate what this something else that Jesus is thirsting for might be, let’s step outside of the drama that the author of John has set for us and look to the teachings of Jesus from Matthew, Mark and Luke that deal with thirst. In Jesus’ great Sermon on the Mount he said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”^{2,3}

¹Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home by Another Way.* “Thirsty for Heaven.” Boston: Crowley Publishing , 1999. 102.

²Matthew 5:6 RSV

³When I hear the word “righteousness,” I often think of the Buddha’s Eightfold Noble Path of 1. Right View, 2. Right Intention, 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action, 5. Right Livelihood, 6. Right Effort, 7. Right Mindfulness, and 8. Right Concentration.

And then in only one other place in the synoptic gospels do the words “thirst” or “thirsty” appear and this is in Matthew when Jesus is teaching his disciples on the Mount of Olives, the afternoon of the day before he died, and he speaks of the second coming when the nations and people of the Earth will be judged and they will be separated into the sheep and the goats, and what will separate them is this: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”⁴ The righteous nations and people will have done this, and they will then enter the kingdom of heaven

And then Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

Given this, the other empowering meaning that we can take from Jesus’ words “I am thirsty” is that “I am thirsty for justice and righteousness.” I find the irony biting in that the next thing that Jesus gets, following his words “I am thirsty,” was someone—most likely a Roman soldier—a representative of the great Roman Empire—giving him vinegar instead of water. At once in that very act, the cruelty of Rome was punctuated with an exclamation mark—as if to say, “When I was thirsty you gave me vinegar!” And even a greater irony is that Jesus freely gave of the water of the spirit as he said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”⁵ And yet at the time of his death, Jesus was in a dry and desolate place, and he was thirsty for righteousness, for justice, for loving-kindness between all peoples, for loving each other as he had loved all.

CONCLUSION

What would Jesus say seeing the dry and desolate places of these times in which we live today? Would he still hunger and thirst for righteousness among all people? Certainly! How would he judge the nations and people now remembering that he said, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” How would he judge the power of Rome today, of governments who are more interested in their national power and balance of payments and deficits than they are of feeding the hungry, providing clean water for the thirsty, welcoming the stranger in their midst, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and bringing compassion for the imprisoned. Remembering that what we do to the least, we do to him, would we still give him sourness instead of the waters of righteousness and justice? Yes he was thirsty. We all should be thirsty for righteousness—even today—especially today! May “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” These are the living waters! In a world without end, Amen.

⁴OffMt 25:35-36

⁵John 4:14