

Passion Vespers
Sunday in Lent IV (3 April 2011)

Christ Lutheran Church
Rochester, MN

It is Finished!
John 19:30

Our lives are cluttered with unfinished projects. We carry our “to do list” of things that never get done. Well-intended resolutions are made that are left unfulfilled. Our best laid plans get interrupted by sickness, accident, or the onset of other responsibilities and undertakings we thought we could manage are left half done or hanging. People come to the end of their lives with work still to do that now will never be brought to completion. Life ends with a whimper or a bang and with it the opportunity to wrap things up, to finish what we started.

How different it is with Jesus. He came into the world with a singular purpose. The aim of His life was not self-fulfillment or simply to get through, to survive as long as possible and then slip away without pain. No, He came into the world to give His life over to death for sinners. It is what the Bible calls sacrifice. He comes to give His life as a ransom for many. He comes as John the Baptist announces just after Jesus’ Baptism as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His destiny is the cross and from that divinely-appointed path, He does not flinch or run away in fear. As the hymn says He goes like a lamb uncomplaining forth.

He goes to that cruel death, despised and without esteem, to accomplish the purpose for which the Father sent Him, to die the death that will reconcile a world of sinners to God. No one will grab His life from Him. Rather Jesus goes to the cross to give up His life for you. He will not be deterred. He will not stop until He finishes the work that is His vocation alone, a task that no other can do. Just after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus said “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (John 12:27). The Lord seeks no way of escape from Calvary. Jesus follows the divine script of the prophetic Word which appoints the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into His glory.

Jesus finishes off our sin and with it our death and the captivity to the devil that it brings. “It is finished.” For ever accusation of the law that points out your incompleteness, your sins of omission, your failure to achieve the goals set by yourself, by others, and by God Himself, these three little words are sweet Gospel. “It is finished.” When those hands nailed to the cross had finished the work of salvation, the Lord said “It is finished.” He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

Contrast our Lord’s words with the way we have come to talk about death. One of the euphemisms that we have for suicide is the phrase, “he took his own life.” Now that is an ironic way of talking. It presupposes that your life is your own. You are then free to keep it for take it. That is the lie so apparent in way that our world has come to see death.

We think of death as simply a biological fact. We are more comfortable to keep death in the realm of biology. Then there can be completely naturalistic explanations of death. Death, after all, is just part of life and a natural one at that. Just as summer finally must give way to fall and fall to winter, so youth gives way to age and the aged must go the way of death. One generation passes from the stage to give room to the next. We can be rather stoic about death for it is no more than the final turn in the cycle of life's circle. Then the suggestion of Jacques Derrida, a postmodern philosopher, makes sense: you can give yourself the gift of death. Death is yours for the taking. Enter euthanasia and the nobility of assisted suicide. If life will be taken from me, at least I can take it- I can determine the time and the place. I don't have to go whimpering and whining into that dark night. I can choose the means, the locale and the time of the final exit.

Life is not ours to take; it is a gift from God. When Jesus comes to die, His life is not taken from Him by Pilate or His Roman executioners. Earlier Jesus said no one takes His life from Him but that He lays it down of His own accord. This is just what He does on Good Friday as He says "It is finished," bows His head and gives up His spirit.

He gives up His life for you. The One who had no sin and yet is made sin, made a curse for you that in Him you might have God's own righteousness. Your redemption is finished. There are no missing pieces of the puzzle to put in place. There is nothing left for you to do. There is nothing for you to contribute to bring salvation to completion. The deed is done. The Lamb of God has finished it. Your sin is forgiven. You are forgiven.

We are not left to finish our lives as best we see fit, bringing them to an end if health or dignity, or money run out. For when Jesus' finished with His life, dying in your place, He claimed your life for Himself. That is why we confess in the Catechism, "I believe in Jesus Christ...who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity."

Jesus' dying words from the cross "It is finished" is not a cry of defeat or resignation to powers of a fate beyond His control. Not at all. It is rather an announcement to the whole universe that He is the victor over sin; that He is the King whose lordship over death and hell. It is the good news that Jesus is finished with all that would separate You from Him. You don't see that victory now. We still feebly struggle in a life that is hidden under the cross. That is what it means to walk by faith. But the victory is sure and certain because the Lamb of God has finished His work. We await the revealing of that completion in the resurrection of our bodies. In the meantime, we have His promise: "It is finished." And that is enough for our living and our dying. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

-Prof. John T. Pless