

I am thirsty : John 19:28-29, Parts of Psalm 22

This is a sermon in our series on the words Jesus spoke from the cross. According to John 19:28, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' That is just one word in Greek, of four letters. What do these four letters tell us?

1: Full humanity

John gives little indication of how much Jesus suffers. But here he does. Jesus means: 'Please, give me something to drink!' He must be suffering terribly. It's the most mundane of the seven sayings. To say that you're thirsty is not a highly spiritual thing to say, like the previous sayings. Jesus is very human here.

One of the soldiers listens to this dying man. He dips a hyssop stalk with a sponge into a jar of wine vinegar and brings it to Jesus' mouth. Jesus is not given water, but wine vinegar. In hot climates water is not always safe. This wine vinegar was the soldiers' drink at the time, hence it was available there.

2: Scripture

What happens to Jesus is not fate, mishap, accident. It is God's plan. The script for the passion was written in heaven. Jesus is obedient to this plan. Many elements of the Old Testament are fulfilled here! Jesus knows this – and John brings it out for Jewish readers. The most relevant examples are:

- A. John writes that Jesus said 'I am thirsty' to fulfil the Scriptures. But which? It seems that two passages qualify as source:

Psalm 22:15 says:

'My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.'

And Psalm 69:19-21 is:

'You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you.

Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless;

I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none.

They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.'

It is likely that both Psalms are in John's mind.

- B. Much else from Psalm 22 also returns in the passion story:

'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.

My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet.

All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.

They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.'

- C. The hyssop stalk (John 19:29) is a subtle reference to the exodus from Egypt, to the night of the Passover, when hyssop was used to sprinkle the doorposts with the blood of a lamb (Exodus 12:22). Thus Jesus appears here as the lamb who takes away the sins of the world (see also John 1:29).
- D. Just moments later Jesus bows his head and dies. He dies like a sheep led to the slaughter, like a sheep that is silent with its shearers (Isaiah 53:7, 10):

'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth. ...
Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord
makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his
hand.'

E. In addition to the physical thirst, Jesus will also have longed for God. About such thirst we read in Psalm 42:

'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?'

These words lead us to spiritualising of what Jesus says: spiritual thirst and spiritual drink.
(Not at the expense of the literal meaning, but as an extra layer of meaning.)

3: Holy irony: Reversal of the Cana sign

At the start of the Gospel John tells us that at Cana Jesus had given drinks to the guests. He had been given water and turned it into wine. Later Jesus had asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. And he had offered us all living water:

'... Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.' (John 7:37-39) You find a similar promise in Revelation 21:6.

Now, at the end of his life, Jesus receives wine and becomes the source of water (19:34). The order is reversed.

So we see: Jesus' very real suffering on the cross is God's plan – and it brings us life – if we accept it. Have you asked him for the living water?