

I THIRST

John 19:28

Rev. Leo Douma, 16 March 2008

One of the beer companies has an advert that says "A hard earned thirst needs a big cold beer, and the best cold beer is Vic". Certainly a few cold beers can quench a thirst, but too many can leave you a bit numb brained as well. Perhaps that's why many drink more than they need to, because they not only have a physical thirst, but a spiritual one, a deep yearning for life without the pain, the frustration, the anger, the loneliness. It seems to be very much part of our human nature- to be thirsty, yearning, longing.

Spiritually we have a deep thirst for relating with God, though many would not identify it that way. Physically we are very dependent on water. It does not take much for us to reach for a cup of coffee or a glass of water. A hot day, a busy morning with the children, a game of golf, and we develop a thirst, we need a drink to get back our energy.

When we think of Jesus' situation in our text it is no surprise to us that he is thirsty. Son of God he is, but every bit as human as us. He has the same physical limitations and needs. It is interesting to note that our text comes from the gospel of John. He was the last to write his gospel, much later than the others. By then a sect had developed, called the Gnostics, who said that Jesus was not really human. He was God that appeared human, bit like a phantom. So it is significant that John records these words of Jesus in our text. Jesus saying "I thirst", demonstrates how really human he is. If we think about it Jesus must have been very thirsty. His last drink had been at the Last Supper with the disciples. There Jesus had raised the cup and said: "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood which*

is poured out for you..." Jesus knew what was coming. Very late that night he had been arrested. In the early morning he had been interrogated by the Jewish leaders and then by Pilate. He had been ridiculed and terribly beaten by the soldiers. At about 9am in the morning he had been hung on the cross. He hung there for hours as the day got hotter and hotter, bleeding, suffering, dehydrating.

From midday till three in the afternoon everything had gone dark as Jesus suffered in the pits of hell. It's now after that time, after Jesus had cried out his complaint: "*God...why have you forsaken me?*" Yes, Jesus would have been very thirsty, spiritually thirsting for God and physically desperate for water. His lips would have been very cracked, his throat so dry and his strength so exhausted that he would hardly have been able to speak. He would barely have been able to say this fifth word on the cross. The fourth utterance had been a violent scream from the depths of hell. But this utterance is a barely audible croak: "*I thirst*". In the Greek it is one short word. Why does John need to emphasize that Jesus is human? So we recognize that he is just like us. The one who suffered in our place, who rose from the dead and ascended to heaven is God, yes, but also a very ordinary human being like you and me. People are still today not always ready to hear that.

Max Lucado wrote in one of his books about Jesus as a teenager. He described him as awkward and having pimples. He received a letter of complaint from an irate woman who said she would never buy another one of his books. Her point of contention: My saviour did not have pimples. But if Jesus is as human as any young man growing up then he would have had all the issues of any teenager. The point is Jesus is human. So what? So, he knows our stuff. He knows what it is like to be hungry, thirsty, angry, lonely, tired, tempted. The writer to the Hebrews (4:14-16) says (and I read

from The Message) *"Now that we know what we have- Jesus, this great High Priest, with ready access to God- let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all- all but sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help"*. So whether we are a child, a teenager, a mature adult, Jesus knows our stuff. You see, the ruler of this universe understands you. He knows what you need. And he cares enough to provide it.

That becomes clear when we see how he is so willing to yield himself for his people's benefit. Let's look again at our text. It is not surprising that Jesus is thirsty. What is surprising, at least for those who were standing there at the cross is that Jesus said so. Those Roman soldiers would have been thinking "Why does he ask for a drink now? He refused the stuff before". We read of the earlier refusal in Mark 15:23 *"They came to a place called Golgotha. There they offered him wine to drink, mixed with myrrh, but after tasting it he refused to drink it."* It seems that caring women brought the wine and myrrh to those crucified because it helped the dying men cope with the pain. It doesn't seem that the myrrh helped to anesthetize those crucified. Perhaps it gave a better taste to the rough wine which did the numbing. Why did Jesus refuse it? Surely he needed a drink already then. It seems most likely that Jesus said 'no' precisely because the wine acted as a sedative (you know how alcohol messes with your head) and he wanted to be fully aware on the cross. He wanted to be in control of himself. He wanted to consciously give himself in his suffering in hell. But now he wants a drink. He needs it badly and he asks for one: *"I thirst"*. John tells us that (19:29): *"A jar of wine vinegar was there so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of hyssop plant and lifted it to Jesus' lips."* So the wine vinegar was still there, ready. It was the

rough wine the soldiers drank lots of. They would have made good use of the jars of wine, let me tell you. They lifted the sponge on the short stalk of the hyssop plant. Jesus would not have been that much higher up than the soldiers.

It is interesting to note that Matthew and Mark describe Jesus being mocked as he gets his drink. Because Jesus in his fourth utterance had cried out "*Eloi, eloi...*", ("*My God, my God...*") the mockers made a pun and mock "Right, he's called Eli-jah. Let's see if Elijah will come and save him."

But John makes no mention of the mockers; not here, or earlier when Jesus was first placed on the cross. That's because John is showing Jesus, not as a victim, but as the 'hidden king' who has all things in control. Now that gives us the clue as to why Jesus now wants a drink. The first part of our text also helps give this understanding: "*Knowing that all was now completed and so that the scripture would be fulfilled Jesus said 'I am thirsty'".* Now, how does Jesus saying "*I thirst*" relate to "*all being completed*" and how will it "*fulfil the scriptures*"? It is not just a case of Psalm 69:21 saying "*...they gave me vinegar for my thirst*", and so Jesus said it to fulfil David's psalm. It is the whole of scripture that Jesus is about to fulfil; the whole point of God's revelation in history is to restore the creation to himself. Remember this is Jesus' fifth saying on the cross. His fourth has been "*My God why have you forsaken me?*" So Jesus is complaining of his thirst after the three hours of darkness. It was then that he suffered the full anger of God for sin. He had gone through hell itself. When he went through that struggle he had sunk so far below human comprehension that not a word came from his lips. Human thoughts and words could not describe what he went through. Even his scream, his awful complaint at the end are words whose fullest meaning we will never know. Then he

had thirst too. He had thirsted for the '*living waters*'. That thirst had been beyond human. Jesus was in another world; the world where the grace of God was completely withdrawn. There a cup of water was utterly useless. There he thirsted not physically, but spiritually. He thirsted and yearned (desperately) for God. He yearned for "*My God, my God*". As Psalm 42:1 "*My soul pants for you, O God, my soul thirsts for the living God...*" But that thirsting was his victory. He did not succumb to hell. He suffered the full rejection of God and still yearned for his God and father. Again, as Psalm 42 "*when can I go and meet with God?*"

But now Jesus has come out of the deepest pit. He has come back into the world again. Now he feels his body again. He is conscious of being on the cross. And he knows he has done it. He has completed the punishment for sin; the eternal death; the complete rejection by God. He has borne it and conquered it. That is finished now. In fact in a few moments he will cry out "*It is finished*". He will want strength to call that out. (But that is for next week). He knows that "*all is now completed.*" All that is left to do is to surrender his body. Jesus had died the second death. That is now completed. Now he has one thing left to do to fulfil the scriptures; to die the first death. That's when the heart stops and a man breaths his last and dies, the body is buried- that is the first death. That is also part of the curse for sin. For the unbelieving person it's a case of (physically) dying first and then comes the second death (spiritual death); the rejection by God. But for Jesus it was the other way round. Jesus knew that the last part of the penalty was now to come (or the first part from our perspective). And so Jesus is now preparing himself for this. He is going to fulfil scripture. So he says "*I thirst.*"

Jesus wants a drink because he needs all the strength he can get. At first he wanted no drink because he wanted a clear mind to be

able to give himself in hell. Now for the same reason he needs a drink. Jesus is paying attention to his physical needs because he wants to give his life. Jesus is to be the lamb sacrificed for God's people. Notice John's symbolic gesture as he says a hyssop plant is used to give Jesus a drink. It was hyssop that was used to sprinkle the blood of the Pascal lamb on the door frames of the Israelites in Egypt. But Jesus is not only the lamb on the altar. He is also the high priest who gives the offering. He presents the sacrifice of his body. *"Here is my body which must be given for many for the forgiveness of their sins. He is my blood which must be poured out for many for the forgiveness of their sins."* This is what Jesus must do to fulfil the scriptures, to bring forgiveness as God had promised throughout all his Word. So he prepares himself: *"I thirst"*. It doesn't matter if he drinks water or sour wine/vinegar, so long as he gains some strength; for Jesus does not want to die while he is unconscious. He wants to be fully conscious. He wants to take definite action. His death is not to be passive, something that happened to him. Jesus performs it as a deed, a priestly offering. In his great compassion for the lost sinners, in his amazing grace for a fallen world, Jesus wants to give himself. So he asks for what is necessary for him to fulfil his last act at the altar: *"I thirst"*.

The reason Jesus is so willing to be human, so willing to yield himself to death on the cross, is that he knows what our desperate need is, what is required if any human being is to truly experience forgiveness and life. Jesus' time in hell made it crystal clear again that when we are separated from God we will have a deep spiritual thirst. Just like God made our bodies such that we need so much water to function properly, so he has made our souls such that we need to have a connection with God.

It is interesting how Jesus says in Luke 16:24 of a man in hell who begged for some one to: *"dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this flame"*. Hell is a place of eternal thirst. We experience the beginning of that thirst already now when we are separated from God. We have an empty spot inside that only God can fill. No matter what we do, nothing can fill that emptiness. The Psalmist picks up the point when he writes (42:1) *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you O God... When can I go and meet with God?"* We know what the Psalmist is saying. When we look around us we see a thirsty world. We humans will do anything to satisfy that thirst. We run after mirages of money, alcohol, drugs, sex, power, relationships, and a thousand other imitations. We stand amazed at how the rich and famous seem to have everything yet nothing. Like the atheist billionaire who said "I would give away every dollar I have for a good night's sleep". St Augustine wrote long ago "Our soul is restless until it rests in thee O Lord". Jeremiah (2:13) records God's feelings about our propensity to drink the cheap stuff: *"They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that can not hold water"* Jesus (John 7:37-38) stood up at the Feast and said in a loud voice, *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scriptures have said, streams of living water will flow from within him"*.

Are you thirsty? In his sermon on the mount Jesus (Matthew 5:6) said *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* Are you thirsty? John in describing heaven in the book of Revelation (7:16-17) writes: *"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water"*. As if to

make a powerful point the Bible actually ends with John recording Jesus' words (Revelation 22:17): "*Whoever is thirsty, let him come, and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life*".

Are you thirsty? Are you parched for God's presence in your life? Have you been drinking out of the broken cisterns? Living water is available because the Son of God became as human as you and me, yielded and gave himself to death, even hell itself. He thirsted desperately so that you and I might find God, might find the living water. Every human being thirsts. The question is how long will you thirst- for eternity in hell -or do you, will you, trust in Jesus, so you need never thirst again?