

THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

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The Seven Last Words of Christ: The Fifth Word

*After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), "I thirst."
(John 19:28)*

Two weeks ago various online news sources were carrying a story about Apollo 11. As you likely know, Apollo 11 was the space flight in July of 1969 that successfully landed astronauts on the moon. When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped out of their tiny craft, named the Eagle, it was the first time that people had set foot on another world. Aldrin described the landscape as "magnificent desolation." Meanwhile, a third astronaut, Michael Collins, remained in the command module, named Columbia, orbiting the moon and waiting to retrieve his two fellow travelers once they had blasted off from the surface. The mission still stands as one of the most remarkable achievements in human history, but it was not without its tense moments.

In addition to the myriad technical problems that could occur, NASA worried about the unpredictable human element. Michael Collins would be alone in Columbia for 24 hours, orbiting the moon while Aldrin and Armstrong walked on the surface. For 48 minutes of every orbit, Collins would be going round the dark side of the moon that never faces the earth. To one side of him would be the great mass of the moon itself that would block all radio contact with mission control and his fellow astronauts. To the other side was the vast silence of interstellar space. How would Collins react? As it turns out, he did fine, but he later wrote, "*I knew I was alone in a way that no Earthling has ever been before.*"

The recent articles pertained to another great fear on the part of NASA: the fate of the two astronauts on the surface. Would the ascent engines of the Eagle ignite? Would they provide enough lift to reach Columbia? All the calculations said they would, but still, a thousand things could go wrong and the engines had never been tested on the moon. In the event of a tragedy that stranded Armstrong and Aldrin on the lunar surface, so that they could not fly away, NASA would have no way to rescue them. Collins was to return to Earth, even if the two below were still alive. President Nixon would read a prepared statement to the nation about the brave sacrifice the men were making. Then a minister would read the Lord's Prayer. Presumably, the astronauts themselves would listen in, after which NASA would sever communications with the two men marooned on the moon. When their oxygen ran out, they would die further from the earth than anyone had died before. Fortunately, the letter went unread, and all three astronauts returned safely. But concerning what could have been, a greater desolation is hard to imagine.

We come now to the fifth of the seven last words that Jesus spoke from the cross. We've heard in the Gospel of John how *Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), "I thirst."* What a perfectly understandable thing for Jesus to say at this late hour of his ordeal. Earlier in the day he had been subjected to a Roman flogging, the result of which would have been a flayed-open back and substantial loss of blood. Then came the crown of thorns pressed into his scalp, and nails the size of railroad spikes driven through his wrists and ankles, thus draining his bodily fluids further still. Factor in many hours exposed to the hot sun and the state of dehydration would be critical. What is more, as the weight of Jesus' body hanging from the cross restricted the natural process of breathing, the precious fluid that remained in his system would be collecting in all the wrong places: around his heart and in his lungs. Thus, Jesus' throat

must have been absolutely parched by the time he uttered the words, *I thirst*. It's a wonder he was able to say them at all.

We need not go into great detail, as preachers of the fifth word are inclined to do, about how essential water is for life. Suffice it to say, human beings are born thirsty. The first thing a newborn wants to do after a few good breaths and a healthy cry is drink from its mother's breast. To be sure, the simple act involves nourishment for the baby, but something else is happening as well – something on another level, immeasurable and intangible. Mother and child are connecting and developing a deep emotional bond. Thus from our earliest moments we form an association between the quenching of thirst and the presence of life and love. It's a two-level process.

The same holds true in the Gospel of John. One of the keys to interpreting the Fourth Gospel is to understand its multilayered nature. What Jesus says on one level has its true and intended meaning on a deeper level. Therefore, when John records Jesus to have said, "I thirst," he means to point us beyond our biological need for hydration to our spiritual need for connecting with God. For John, for the Psalmist, for many of the Biblical authors, to drink water is a metaphor of experiencing God. To be in the presence of abundant water is to be in the presence of God, whose will it is to give his people abundant life. God's will is to guide his people to springs of living water, from which they can drink and have eternal life.

Conversely, to be without water, to be thirsty, is to be cut off from God. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and are so far from my cry? My mouth is dried out like a pot; my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; and you have laid me in the dust of the grave (Psalm 22)*. What John wants us to understand is that when Jesus said, "I thirst," his suffering was as much spiritual as it was physical. He was experiencing an aloneness that he had never experienced before. He was like the lone astronaut going round to the dark side of the moon. Or, he was as if the worst-case scenario had occurred for the Apollo 11 astronauts on the moon, and they were left to die there cut off from the land of the living. For Jesus at this hour, the lively communion and fellowship he had always enjoyed with God was severed. The One whose Spirit had brooded over the waters of creation, who had walked on water, and turned water into wine was now unable to water his own parched throat. A greater desolation is hard to imagine. I thirst.

We thirst. We thirst for God. My hunch is that the human thirst for God is a universal desire, even among those who may stridently deny it. We thirst for love. We thirst for justice and righteousness. We thirst for ultimate meaning and purpose. The Psalmist (42) put it this way: *As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?* Strangely, the nature of human life is that no experience can adequately quench our thirsty souls. Orson Welles told the story of a cruel trick he once played on a wasp. Welles was having breakfast outdoors one morning when a wasp landed on his plate and began sucking up the jam that covered his toast. With a small pair of scissors Welles cut the wasp in half. But the wasp didn't seem to care. *He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed esophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him. It is the same with modern man, writes Welles.*¹ We thirst for God, and no matter how much we drink of mortal life, we thirst for more.

I think of a woman named Amy Krouse Rosenthal, an author of children's books who recently died of cancer at age 51. Shortly before her death Rosenthal wrote a moving piece in *The New York Times* in praise of the wonderful husband she would leave behind, even commending him to the right woman who might want to marry him after she was gone. Rosenthal wrote that she had 26 beautiful years of marriage with her husband. She had wanted – she had expected – 26 more. She recalled how her parents had frequently told her that the first word she had spoken as

a child – the very first word that tumbled from her lips – was “more.” And she wrote that her first word would probably be her last: “more.” She wanted more. She thirsted.

I think of Pete Hogden, our devoted, talented, cantankerous facilities manager who died two weeks ago today, at age 54, from complications after heart surgery. Pete was a guiding force behind all the building projects at Grace Church in the past 15 years: the spire, the organ, the stained glass, the new air handling units, and even this current effort to restore the ceiling. The last thing he did here was to figure out how the west gallery could support the 18,000 pounds of scaffolding you see there today. Pete loved this building, and thrilled to be part of its renewal and restoration. He told me several times that someday he hoped to bring his grandchildren here, show them a fully restored Grace Church, and tell them, “I did this.” He wanted to look at the church, and like Jesus, be able to say, “It is finished.” It was not to be. Pete ran out of time. He wanted more. We wanted more. We thirst.

So I think of Pete Hogden, and I think of Amy Rosenthal, and I also think of myself. Yes, my Good Friday confession to you is that, for good or for ill, I often think of myself. Sometimes several times a day. Last fall my doctor informed me that now, since I am in my mid-50s, it was time for me to have that indelicate procedure which needs no description other than to say it involves a specialized camera and general anesthesia. I had never been under general anesthesia before, so I was curious to know what the experience would be like. Would it be similar to sleeping? Would I be aware of the passage of time? Would I dream? No, it was nothing like that at all. In fact, it was like *nothing* at all. Nothing. Thirty minutes of nothingness. It was as if I were severed from myself, without even my own thoughts for company. It was not a magnificent desolation. It was a blank. I was gone. Reflecting on the experience afterwards I wondered: is that what it means to die – like going round to the dark side of the moon and never emerging again, not even to yourself? Believe me, I have a renewed appreciation for the grace of God, who holds our souls in life. *As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?*

One of the most frequently asked questions about today is why we call it good. The answer doesn't have to be complicated. We call it Good Friday because of who it is we believe was hanging on the cross. This is God on the cross. Good Friday is only good because of the Incarnation. God in Christ went to the cross not by accident, not by happenstance, not out of curiosity. No, we believe it was for us that he hung and suffered there. Jesus went to the cross willingly, obediently, to join us in the place of our deepest, darkest desolation. And not to join us only, but wake us and lift us up and bring us home to appear before the presence of God.

We shall appear before the presence of God. Then at last the Psalm shall be fulfilled, and he who sits upon the throne shall say: *It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life (Revelation 21:6).*

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¹ Jones, Alan. Journey into Christ. Cowley Publications, 1992, p. 27.