

“IT IS FINISHED...”

**Text: “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 up to his mouth. When Jesus had received
the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ and he bowed
his head and gave up his spirit.” John 19:29-30**

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You and I know a lot about what Jesus went through during Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday and the little parade down through the Kidron valley with their Lord and Master riding on the back of a donkey. We all love a parade. I often stand with tears in my eyes when the High School bands go down the street playing “Stars and Stripes Forever”, although I doubt if there were any such Sousa music when Jesus was cheered by the palm waving crowds. But we all can lock into the feeling: how the world bestows its transient honors, and when the 15 minutes of allotted fame expires, the world says, “O.K., hop down, time to move along now. Make way for the palms and the praise to go on to someone else, usually younger and more agile.”

We know all something about the transitory victories this mortal life can give. Queen or King for a day or a while, but then suddenly, as with folk like movie starlets, or idols on TV, or plain old wives in suburbia, or heroes on the playing fields, or company Presidents, or Pastors, or Politicians, or even children who disappoint us, the music stops, the parade ends and it’s back to normalcy or worse. “Sic Transit Gloria Mundi” is the way they bandied it about in ancient Rome: a servant carried that sign home behind the General, even after his finest victory: “Sic Transit Gloria Mundi” - Glory departs as quickly as it comes.” We have a hint in our hearts about Palm Sunday, but I go on to say that we could never echo these final words from the Cross: “It is finished!” They belong to Jesus Christ alone.

And we can slip into that vigorous scene on the Temple grounds on Monday afternoon, when the Lord Jesus got angry, and stormed about the Courtyard, kicking over their gaming tables and screaming at the incessant vendors that they had turned the House of God into a den of thieves. They were gouging

the worshippers for items necessary for sacrifice. We know what it's like when anger takes us over, when voices rise and people shout, and insults are hurled back and forth which never should have reached the level of human discourse. Christians are nice and peaceful, docile, until someone crosses us or we are offended or we do not get what we want. Then, watch out!

Anybody, everybody can act out of character, when anger crops up and forces itself out, without proper warning. It tends to happen more when we are tired, or tense, or feel neglected or used or abused, (or that is what we say) but we know what it is like to lose it and vent our anger on others.

Jesus was a real live human being, with all of the feelings and shortcomings of time and place which normal mortals have. He was more than mortal, of course, but he was mortal. That is what the Incarnation means. He came to earth to be like us, tempted in all ways such as we. He normally overflowed with kindness and love; but when he strolled into the Temple area that afternoon and saw what they were doing, he blew up.

Jesus dignifies our angry moments, so long as they not our selfish responses when we do not get our way. We need more righteous indignation in the world, people standing up for what is good and right and holy. We can understand why Jesus lost his temper with the money-changers, but we know next to nothing about these penultimate words from the cross: "It is finished."

And we can understand his visit up to Bethany, his place of refuge on Tuesday, with his friends. We all love a quiet retreat away from the rush of it all. We need those times, too. There are not enough of them, the way we live our city lives, it is difficult to sit loose to the worries of the day. These are great times, but we live them too fast. So, we can embrace the warm and friendly feeling and relaxation Jesus enjoyed when he was up at the home of

Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. We know a lot about holy week; but we stand listless and dumfounded when we come to these final words from the Cross.

And, we have had our Maundy Thursdays too; how those times come when we are afraid and lonely, when our friends let us down and fall asleep, when we wander off into the private gardens of our lives to talk to God alone, and weep. Some things you have to face alone; sometimes you have to walk the lonesome valleys by yourself. Each of us knows what it is like when everything caves in, everybody wanting something...and there is no one there to lean on. We can all slip into the Upper Room and understand the conversation and questions. Each of us can tiptoe out into the Garden and overhear the anguish of our Lord, praying “Would God that life could be different, would that this cup could pass me by, would that we and those we love would never have to suffer.” We know all about loneliness and fear, and fickle friends and family, and about how others let us down.

But my concern today is that we know next to nothing about the Cross which Jesus had bear; and we could never reproduce these final words on the Cross: “It is finished.” What do you think he meant? In Greek, our sentence is one single word: “Tetelesai”, tetelesai. It is the eschatological same word which was used to signify the end of the age, the ultimate destiny of things, the summit of our hopes and dreams all rolled up in this one peculiar little word. It also had a hint of doom to it sometimes, like when Alexander the Great’s empire crumbled around him, the classical Greek name for the occurrence was, Tetelesai. All gone, done, finito, over and out, “Bye bye Alexander.”

But what did Jesus mean when he used the words? Well, on the surface he no doubt meant that his life on earth was over. That’s for sure. But he meant far

more than that. He meant his life's work, his goals, his accomplishments, his obedience to the Father was fully over too, Mission Accomplished, we might say in the idiom of our time.

Tetelesai! It hardly belongs to the likes of you and me as mortal human beings, often procrastinating, sometimes complaining, usually consulting, frantically wheeling-dealing, routinely diverted from the grand high road; it would be a non-sequiter to whisper Tetelesai. Our job is never done, not fully even when we do our level best and put our cudgels down and head home at the end of the day. William Faulkner once confessed from his Mississippi dwelling place that he had never finished a novel, not really, he said: "I just abandon them to the printer."

Ask any good artist or any musician, the work is never fully completed. I used to know a successful Florida artist. She loved to paint houses along a peaceful Florida shore, with flowers out in front. She said there was this one scene which never seemed to be complete. One day, twelve years after she had first painted it, she jumped up and added one small flower in the corner and she was satisfied, for a while.

Or, I listened to an interview of Emanuel Ax, the noted concert pianist from Poland last Wednesday morning on WDAV, the NPR Station up in Davidson. He was admitting that he had never learned to master the "Finale" from Brahms' Second Piano Concerto: "I cannot really play it", he admitted, but I keep trying time and again and again." "Why do you keep on trying?" the interviewer asked: "Because it is such great music", he replied, "and I hope someday to get it right."

Even ask any preacher worth his salt whether he or she is competent to handle the Word of God properly from the pulpit; the honest answer will invariably be “Not really, I just keep trying to get it right.” Old Carlyle Marny, my friend the Baptist down the street, used to warn that an honest pastor should begin to stutter when he stands up to begin to preach the Word of God.” It is not ours to say “Tetelesai”, and mean it.

No life is ever finished, either. It is not our lot to complete the things we set out to do; it is not our gift to find perfection: so much done, so much left undone is the story of our days. To miss the mark, by a little or by a lot. Sixty years ago some far sighted teacher taught me that I needed goals to live by, like the Ancient Mariner needs the North Star to guide his ship. “You cannot possibly reach them, or your goals will not be high enough.” she would say. But they should be up there always beckoning us on to higher things, to higher expectation, harder work, harder choices...softer landings.

If there is anyone within the sound of my voice who can honestly say “I have done my part; I am satisfied with all that I have done.” let him or her stand up now and complete this sermon. If you wish to boast about your life and its meaning, stand up and shout it out. I will gladly sit down and listen to you tell your story. Most everyone I know, or have ever known, would more likely say: “I wish I could have done more. I wish I had known how quickly it would all pass. I wish I could drop back and alter some of the things I said and did and did not do.”

St. Paul nicks us there in the Book of First Timothy. Poor misguided little unemployed Jewish tentmaker, broken in body, having wasted his education, turned his back on his upbringing, chasing after some ethereal vision, disgracing his parents, departing his religion, destroying himself with

worry...all that and more. But listen to him now as he sits in prison near the end of his life, rejected, a laughing stock, jeered at by the Centurions with their shiny helmets and red, tufted manes of hair along the crown, with sharpened spears in hand. He was in chains, the envy of no one at all.

Still he had the audacity to write to his young friend, unfortunately far-far away: “The time of my departure has come; but I have kept the faith, I have finished the course”. I have succeeded –there’s our word again – Tetelesai! It is finished. It is a cry of triumph, like the Little Leaguer I remember who hit a home run one afternoon to win the game. He came racing around third base and he cried out to his father in the stands, “Hey, Dad. I did it. I did it!” If he had known the perfect word, the little ten year old might have shouted, Teletesai! Jesus was saying that there is a crown of righteousness awaiting him and all the rest of us who loved his appearing – not because we have earned it, not because we are worthy, but because we are his.

But now then, what of you, and what of me? Is it a finished product, this life that we live from day to day? Life ends, of course it does, soon or late. We cannot do everything we want to do in one generation, nothing like it. Three score and ten, or if there be four score or more, it still is not nearly enough. In the Valley of the Kwai, one of Ernst Gordon’s young soldiers wrote this little poem:

There were so many things I meant to try,
So many contests I had hoped to win.
But lo, the end approaches, just as I
Was thinking of preparing to begin.

Then I think of Jesus on the first Good Friday, although they did not call it that, stumbling up the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Suffering, staggering under the weight of the cross. He looked like the loser, to everyone but his Father. Those standing by were weeping. Jesus called to them: “Don’t weep for me, weep for yourselves.” Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourselves. I know where I am going. I set my course, or rather it was set for me from the beginning, and I never departed from it.”

The worth of life is not measured by its length, but by its height and depth, by the way it reproduces the purpose God had in mind the moment when your life and mine were given. We came on this mortal stage, not when we chose, but when the Lord had need of us. And when his need for us is over, so ends the gift of life he gave.

Beauty is not measured by its length....a single moment can mean more than a myriad of years. A brilliant sunset over the western hills can surpass the whole long tedious day. Our lives are touched by others and our lives touch theirs too, in an instant. Some of the most wonderful and memorable things I live by, I came across in a chance meeting or a single lecture or one favorite book or an accidental meeting one day. And some people I hold most dear, I have known only for a little while. Jack London once chided when they told him to take it easy: “I would rather burn out like a meteor blazing its few shining moments through the sky, than be a lazy old planet circling the heavens for an eternity.” When God calls, we need seize the moment and jump up with joy to say with Isaiah: “Here I am Lord, send me.” And the devil take the rest.

If there are ever any words that you and I should borrow from our Lord, it should be these. “Tetelesai”...it is finished. Lord, I give thee back the life I

owe that in thy ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be. All is well, Mission Accomplished, Hallelujah. Amen.

Those are the words of Good Friday, which we need to hang on to and linger around with the longest. If he loved the little children of the world enough to die for them, then the least that we can do is reach out a hand to help them on their weary way. Carrying crosses, not hanging them up on the wall, is the occupation of the willing Christian.

Christ said other things from the Cross: seven messages which were remembered, One from Matthew; three from Luke and three from John. Mark leaves him on the cross in silence. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” To the criminal hanging beside him, he said “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” To his Mother Mary and John the Beloved, he said: “Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.” Take care of each other after I am gone. Then, in Aramaic, he cried out, “Eli, Eli lama Sabach Thani.” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Then he said, “I thirst.” Then he said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” Then John says he said, “Tetelesai.” It is finished.

Scots folk singer Jeanne Redpath lamented in her famous Scottish ballad: “It’s almost over now, but I’m easy.” I’m easy. Annie Dillard whispered down at Tinker’s Creek, “The dying never say ‘Please’, they always say ‘Thank you’.” And with everything else, I think our Lord was saying, “Thank you Father, it is almost over now, and I am coming home.”

But, watch it....hmmmmmm...watch it. We know how the story ends. We know how the Father God was accomplishing something grand and lasting in the life of the one human being who got it right. But if Jesus knew that all the

while, it would take his self accepted suffering out of it. If he were only pretending that he was lonely and afraid. But, if really incarnated as a real live man, he faced the pain and suffering and agony of it all. In the process, he was proving that as least one man, temped and troubled such as we, finally made it to the end...perfect, without a spot or blemish, without one selfish moment. One man, the one who is hanging there still for a minute or two longer, suffering, crying, dying, and ...try not to miss the final twist, hold on to your seat with the reversal of the heavenly plot.

Before his spirit was committed and Jesus left this mortal life for good, listen one more time to his penultimate refrain. He said “It is finished. Tetelesai!”

And listen, as from the highest mountaintop above the yonder reaches of the time and space we occupy, when Jesus said, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit”. The Heavenly Father answered in a whisper so pure, so holy, so personal, so silently that only Jesus Christ could hear it: “Well done my boy, well done. I am sorry you had to suffer. It really broke my heart. But come on home now. Your special chair is waiting for you. Come here and sit down by my side. I will explain it all to you; enter now into your everlasting peace.

The dying Christ said, “It is finished.” He meant, “It is only begun”, It has only begun, for now and forever more. Amen.

