

## **“Jesus’ work on the cross” (John 19:28-30)**

**“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it 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 19:28-30)**

Our theme for today’s reflection is “Jesus’ work on the cross”. Jesus’ work on the cross... What did He do on the cross? What was His work? What did He finish? What does it mean for us?

These were some of the questions that troubled me deeply during my studies. I wanted to understand this mystery. If the cross of Jesus is at the very center of our faith, how could we not marvel about it, how could we not be curious to understand it as deeply as humanly possible?

On the one hand, sure, it is, indeed, God’s mystery. And as mystery it is by definition incomprehensible for us. We will not be able to completely grasp all the dimensions of what the Triune God accomplished on the cross. Perhaps that will be fully revealed when we see the resurrected Jesus as He is.

But on the other hand, these questions have been on everyone’s mind since the beginning, since it all happened. This is why the Bible used different imagery trying to explain what exactly Jesus did accomplish on the cross.

Let’s look at two of these images – justification and redemption. Both of them are central to our Lutheran faith. Justification is what the Reformation was about, and redemption is at the very heart of the Small Catechism.

First, justification. This is the most often used imagery in the New Testament. What is it about? It is about the context of court. About trial. About accusations and about a verdict that determines our fate.

We know how the law functions. If you break the law then there are consequences. These consequences vary depending of what sort of laws one has broken. Now, imagine that we are at war.

Two powers are waging war, the lawful and benevolent Ruler, to whom all legitimate authority belongs, and whose subjects we all are, and the treacherous and evil rebels, who seek to sow chaos and destruction, trying to undermine and dethrone the benevolent Ruler, and to harm His subjects.

One day the war is over, the victory is won, and the legitimate Ruler requires everyone to give an account on where they stood in this war. And here we are. We who have abandoned our allegiance to our benevolent and faithful Ruler.

We who have broken our loyalty to Him, while He was trying to protect us. We who have cooperated daily with His treacherous adversaries. We who have so often neglected and ignored the good and just laws of our Ruler. We who have

done so much do sabotage His good and wise plans. Now we are on trial. Now everything we have done is exposed. Nothing is forgotten. No hiding. No excuses. What is the worst crime you can commit in time of war against your Ruler? Yes, treason. Our case is clear. Betrayal of our lawful Ruler. We are... guilty. And the verdict is just and well deserved. Death.

This is about us. We live in the time of this great spiritual warfare between the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and His treacherous adversaries – Satan and all his minions, and all who follow and work for them.

How often have we betrayed the trust of our God? How often have we been more loyal to His adversaries and served them? How much have we done to promote the cause of the adversaries by undermining God's will?

Ask yourself – how often have I been more loyal to myself, to what I want and how I want instead of being loyal to my God? How often have I been more concerned with pleasing people than pleasing my Father?

How often have I been more loyal to my career, wealth, family, hobbies, than to the mission of my Lord? All of this is about breaking the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment. All of this is about betrayal and treason against the Triune God.

We don't even need to go to smaller offenses like those relating to the other commandments from the 2<sup>nd</sup> till 10<sup>th</sup>. They simply reveal in details how we have betrayed our Father in heaven.

Disobedience, sabotage, treason, betrayal, cooperation with the enemy. And here we stand in the Divine court and the judgment is spoken. Verdict – guilty on all accounts. Sentence – death. Eternal death.

But then something unbelievable happens. The Son of the Divine Ruler, the One who sits at His right hand, gets up and says: "Let them go. I will take their place. I will bear the severity of the punishment for their treason. I will give my life to save theirs. Let them live. Declare them innocent!"

This is what Jesus did on the cross. He took our place. He received in full what we rightly deserve. How could that be? How would that work? I don't know... That is and remains a mystery of our God unfathomable holiness and grace.

But more important question to ask is this, – what does this mean for us? The Good News. Jesus, the Son of God, has declared you innocent. Not guilty. Righteous. Justified. You are declared justified. You are declared innocent.

You can have good conscience and peace with God. There are no more sins that would make you unpleasant to God the Father, they all are dealt with. It is finished. Now you can joyfully long for the Last Day, for the Last Judgment. For you know what your verdict is – not guilty!

Come and receive the Kingdom that is prepared for you! Besides, if you ever had any doubts whether your life has any value, whether you matter to your

God, here is the proof of how significant you are in His eyes, – Jesus willingly lied down His life, so that only you could live. That is your value to Him, the Son of God. That is how precious you are to your Father in heaven.

This is one of the images that the New Testament uses to explain Jesus' work on the cross. The other one that we mentioned was redemption. Again, the background of warfare is brought up.

Two mighty powers are at war, – the benevolent and faithful Ruler and treacherous and cunning rebels, and as it happens in time of war, some are taken as prisoners of war. They become slaves of their new and ruthless masters.

There is no freedom, there is no choice, there is no escape on their own. There is only bondage and never-ending imprisonment. They can't free themselves. They need a redeemer, or they will perish in slavery.

But who can pay sufficient a ransom? What treasures can buy their freedom? There is someone, whose head these villains would like to have by all means. There is someone, whose life they would gladly accept as a ransom.

The only-begotten Son, the righteous heir of the benevolent Ruler. "Give us your Son as a ransom for many! That is our price. That is the deal." And, indeed, the Son of the mighty Ruler takes up the challenge.

He comes without weapons, riding on a donkey, ready to sacrifice Himself for His people and delivers Himself in the hands of His enemies. He exchanges His life so that everyone else can be freed from their imprisonment.

We were these captives. We were imprisoned and enslaved by sin, devil and death. And Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father voluntarily gave Himself as a ransom for many. But not everything went as the enemies were hoping.

They took His life, but were not able to keep it. On the third day He broke the chains of death and rouse victorious. Our Redeemer, our ransom, our Master, who paid with His blood and His innocent sufferings and death so that we may be His own and live with Him in everlasting righteousness and blessedness.

Again, this imagery doesn't explain everything about the mystery of the cross. But what is more important, it brings us the Good News. You are free. You are no longer slaves to sin and devil and even death. You are redeemed.

You have a new Master. He is not like others. He doesn't imprison you. He doesn't enslave you. He doesn't force you to toil for Him. He frees you. He pays the highest price for your freedom, not silver or gold, but His holy and precious life. He doesn't make you toil for Him. Instead, He serves you. His name is ... Jesus.

It's true that our old masters are still around. Sin still daily seeks to harm us, but it is not our master anymore, in the power of the Holy Spirit we can resist it. Devil still daily does everything to tempt us, but we have much stronger Helper

on our side, the Spirit of truth, who dwells in us. And our current sinful flesh will have to die, and that is for good, but death doesn't have the last word, our Master and Redeemer Jesus has. As He was raised in new glorious body, so will be everyone who wants to be with Him.

See, you are free, Brothers and Sisters. Free to be who you were created to be – children of God the Father, stewards of His creation, heirs of His Kingdom. Now, live as free people of God and enjoy your precious freedom, and may the Holy Spirit help you to be loyal to the One who is always loyal to you.

And, of course, this is not all, there are many other images in the Bible that try to convey to us the mysterious wonder of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. His cross and resurrection indeed stand at the very center of our faith.

That is where we fix our eyes. That is where we stretch our empty hands. That is the place from which our God now shares His most precious gifts, – you are justified and you are redeemed. It is finished.

Just, don't despise these gifts, give thanks to God's for His incredible grace and pray that the Holy Spirit would keep you in one true faith until we see our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ face to face. Our Lord is good. He is so good.

Amen.