

“The mystery of 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.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Our theme for today's reflection is “the mystery of the cross”. What happened on that cross? What did God, what did Jesus do on that cross? Why did He say “it is finished”? What did He finish? What does it mean for us?

Have you wondered about these questions? They puzzled me deeply during my studies. I wanted to understand this mystery. If the cross of Jesus is at the very centre of our faith, how can we not be curious, how can we not seek to understand it as much as humanly possible?

On the one hand, sure, it is God's mystery. As a mystery it is by definition incomprehensible for us. We will never be able to completely grasp all the dimensions of what the Triune God accomplished on the cross. Perhaps the Lord Himself will reveal it to us when we see Him face-to-face.

But on the other hand, these questions have been on everyone's mind since the beginning, since it all happened. What happened? How to understand it? This is why the Bible used different language, or can say imagery trying to explain what exactly the Triune God accomplished on that 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 – “we are justified by faith alone” - and redemption is at the very heart of the Small Catechism – “He redeemed us not with gold or silver...”.

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 the 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 on what sort of laws one has broken. Now, imagine that we are at war.

Two mighty 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. Here we are. We who have betrayed 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 to sabotage His good and wise plans. Now we are on trial.

Now everything we have done and have failed to do is exposed. Nothing is forgotten. Nothing is hidden. 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. The verdict is just and deserved. Capital punishment.

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 what I prefer, 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 lukewarm? 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 1st 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 2nd till 10th. They simply reveal in detail 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 – capital punishment. 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. Your 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's unfathomable holiness and grace.

But the more important question to ask is this – what does this mean for us? The Good News. Jesus, the Son of God, has declared you forgiven. Righteous. You are

declared justified. You can have a 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 you and your life even matter, here is the proof of how significant you are in God's eyes – Jesus willingly laid down His life, so that you could live. That is how much you matter to Him, the Son of God. That is how precious and loved you are to your Father in heaven.

This is one of the images, or metaphors that the New Testament uses to explain the mystery of the cross. **The other one that we mentioned was - redemption.** Again, the background for this imagery is warfare.

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

There is no freedom, there is no choice, there is no escape. There is only bondage and never-ending slavery. They can't free themselves. They need a redeemer, or they will perish in that miserably state. But who can pay a sufficient 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." Surprisingly, the Son of the mighty Ruler takes up the challenge.

He comes without weapons, riding on a donkey, ready to sacrifice Himself for His captive 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 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... they were not able to keep it. On the third day He broke the chains of death and rose victorious. Our Redeemer, our ransom, our Master, who paid "not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, **that you may be His own** and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness"

Again, this image of redemption 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 enslave you. He doesn't force you to toil for Him. He frees you. He pays the highest price for your freedom. 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. The devil still daily does everything to tempt us, but we have a 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 a 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 forgiven people of God and enjoy your precious freedom, and may the Holy Spirit help you to remain loyal to the One who is always loyal to you.

There are many other images in the Bible that try to convey to us the mystery of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. His cross and resurrection indeed stand at the very centre 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 – His forgiveness, true freedom and eternal life. Please, do not despise these gifts, do not take them for granted!

Do not be lukewarm, give thanks to God for His incredible grace and pray that the Holy Spirit will keep you in one true faith until we see our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ face to face. Our Lord is so good.

And you are forgiven and free. It is finished!

Amen.