

The Seven Last Words of Christ
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The SIXTH

After taking a sip of the sour wine, Jesus cried aloud, “It is finished!” Of the sour wine, only the merest sip because, when one is crucified, swallowing only makes things worse and eventually becomes impossible.

“It is finished!” To what does that *it* refer? To the torture of crucifixion? As the sky over Jerusalem darkens and the grains of sand run down into the bottom glass bulb, death, with his “stealing step,” awaits. So the *it* could refer, not only to Jesus’ pain, but to his very life. All commentators acknowledge these possibilities. No commentator endorses them completely. Why not? For the same reason that they don’t take the 5th word, “I thirst,” as referring only to the raging thirst of crucifixion, because we are in the context of scriptural fulfillment. By editing the words of John’s gospel slightly, we can make this context clearer for ourselves: “After this, aware that all was now accomplished, . . . Jesus exclaimed, “It is finished!”

What was the Word of God sent to accomplish? His task goes by different names; salvation, reconciliation, redemption, atonement, or at-one-ment, as I prefer to call it. At-one-ment. Hear this from the Epistle to the Ephesians: “A plan to be carried out in Christ in the fullness of time – to bring all things into one, into *one*, in him, *all* things in the heavens and on the earth.” All things must, therefore, have been, and still are, separated.

The current theory has it that there are *no more than* six degrees of separation between every human being, regardless of ethnic origin. However that may be, separation there certainly is, not only from one another (which, at times, even the sacrament of marriage finds it difficult to overcome) but separation from the rest of creation, from one’s very self, and from God, God who created us to begin

with, and who must still find us lovable or he would not have sent his Son to heal, to restore, and to reconcile. So, from the Epistle to the Colossians: “It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross.”

This brings us back to the Garden of Eden. There they are, Adam and Eve, still standing before the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, still holding out to us the apple. On the ground beneath their feet, and surrounding them on all sides, are all the apple cores of the human race, bitten into, devoured, discarded, left behind. The simple apple and its disobedient tasting hardly seems a sufficient symbol for the cosmic division that original sin produced.

Some historians of theology give St. Augustine the credit for “inventing” original sin. We have no need to take up that problem, if indeed it is one. Instead, we will listen to what Gary Wills says in his little book on St. Augustine:

Though Augustine is called a pessimist and G. K. Chesterton an optimist, it was Chesterton who said the reality of original sin can be observed at that point in a lovely summer afternoon when bored children start torturing the cat. A Jewish scholar tells me he thinks original sin the most self-evident concept in the whole world of thought. And Cardinal Newman said that the present mess of human society suggests it underwent “some primordial shipwreck.”

Only Jesus rescues us from drowning, only Jesus finishes the task, only Jesus achieves and is consequently rewarded. We can only

receive, or fail to receive, the gift outright, the mending of the divided self.

“Only part of us is sane:” says Rebecca West, “only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations. Our bright natures fight in us with this yeasty darkness, and neither part is commonly quite victorious, for we are divided against ourselves and will not let either part be destroyed.”

That is what is finished by Jesus on the Tree of Life.