

John 18:1 – 19:42

It is finished

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We find ourselves experiencing a very odd Good Friday. We're in the midst of a pandemic and learning new phrases like social distancing and self-isolation. Our government is in uncharted territory as far as keeping everyone safe and keeping the economy going. Things have been changing so rapidly that it's very hard to tell where all this will end up. We don't really know yet how long all this will last. For many people, that's quite troubling. Usually, we can cope with a little bit of disruption, a little bit of discomfort, if we know that it won't last long. It's much easier to deal with pain when it's definitely temporary and we can tell when it will end. But we are not in control. We don't know how or when this will end.

But on this day, as the church around the world marks the death of Jesus on the cross, and as it does so in very trying circumstances, there is one thing we do know. Jesus is in control. Even hanging dying on a Roman cross, Jesus shows a level of control and authority that we might struggle to comprehend. When Jesus utters 'it is finished', it's not that his efforts have come to naught, that his attempts are finished, and the outcome was failure. No, Jesus, even with his last breath is declaring truth, declaring his word to us and for us. What he had come to accomplish has been accomplished. It's done. It's complete. The perfect sacrifice for the sin of humanity has been made. In this moment of death, he has fulfilled his purpose.

The mission of Jesus, the Son of God, was to die a substitutionary death for sinful humanity. As a result of his death on our behalf, our sin was atoned for, and our eternal life through him became attainable. Jesus' very purpose in taking on human flesh is fulfilled here as he takes his final breath. And when he declares that it is finished, John says that Jesus 'bowed his head and gave up his spirit'. This rather unusual way of describing someone's death implies that Jesus died voluntarily as an act of his own will. He was in control even in the middle of his own death.

For John's gospel to make such an emphasis is not really that surprising. John's gospel reminds us again and again of why the word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Right back in John chapter one, when the baptiser saw Jesus approaching, he proclaimed "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The purpose, the reason, for the eternal son of God being born as a human being is announced right from the start of his ministry.

And of course, we also have those well-known verses in John chapter three where Jesus and Nicodemus discuss being born again, and Jesus proclaims:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17, ESV)

Jesus was sent into the world to bring salvation. This is his purpose. And dying for the sin of the world is how he achieves that purpose. This is the act of a loving God. To die for our sake, to die on our behalf. Jesus hinted at this in John chapter 10, where he says:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:10-11, ESV)

This is what we see on the cross. Jesus dies as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life of his own accord. Even the whole journey to the cross shows us a Jesus who is in control. And he doesn't use his control, his authority for his own purposes. He knows he has been sent by the Father to achieve something that we sinful humans could not achieve for ourselves.

Even the start of Jesus' great prayer in the garden of Gethsemane before his betrayal and arrest reflects this:

Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me."

(John 17:1-8, ESV)

This prayer is all about the Father sending the Son, and now the hour has come for the Son to glorify the Father. And he does so with by exercising his divine authority. We see this a little bit later in the garden as the soldiers come asking for Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus responds, 'I am he'. This is a very loaded phrase in the scriptures. This is the same 'I am' that we find in Exodus chapter four when Moses asks God who he shall say has sent him.

When Jesus gives this response in the garden of Gethsemane, the soldiers step back and fall to the ground, an appropriate response to a revelation of the divine. And yet Jesus still goes and lets them arrest him. He is God, he is in control, and he lets them take him away. Even in front of Pilate, Jesus proclaims his purpose:

For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. (John 18:37, ESV)

And what was the final thing we heard that voice say before he breathed his last? 'It is finished'. The truth had been proclaimed. The price had been paid. God had poured out his wrath on Jesus. The Lamb of God was now bearing the sins of the whole world. This is how the world was being saved. And Jesus, in his great love for us, breathed his last and gave up his spirit.

'It is finished' is a cry of success, of a purpose being fulfilled. It's a cry of victory, of achieving your goal. And what it means for us is that we don't need to be in control. The one thing that needed to be done has been done. And whatever else happens, whatever else we experience in this life, we need not worry about our salvation. The end is already sorted out. What happens in the middle may take some time and effort to deal with along the way, it may test our patience, our strength, and even our faith. But knowing that Jesus has completed his purpose in being the Lamb of God who takes away your sin, in being the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for your sake, knowing that puts everything else into perspective. Jesus has got it under control, and our lives are eternally safe in him. This day is indeed a good day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.