



.Credit: Alexander Ivanov / Wikimedia Commons

Meditation 9: Death

"When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said 'It is finished'." (John 19:30)

There is all the difference in the world - is there not? - between just finishing something, getting it over and done with ("I want this to be over," we say), and completing it in the fullest sense: accomplishing it, bringing it to its final goal and fulfilment. In the Passion according to John, there is no doubt that John's Jesus is "accomplishing" on the cross what his Father has intended to him to do even from before the world's foundation. The very language he uses has this full and rich evocation - of goal, of triumph, all bound up in the word *tetelestai* ("the goal is reached"). The Logos, the pre-existent Word of John's Prologue, has now enacted his full work of salvation and has been lifted up on the cross, not to humiliation - as the world sees it - but to "glory." Here is John's Jesus, the uplifted Jesus from the God's-eye view, so different, ostensibly, from the Jesus of the other gospels, who sweats out his agony in the garden, and suffers the full horror of human abandonment on the cross. We need both these pictures, and we need them most urgently, for together they give us the full paradox of the God/Man. But why do we especially need John's Jesus on Good Friday, as Jesus dies? Perhaps the clue lies in this matter of "accomplishment." Because John writes not merely from the perspective of the tragic unfolding of the human narrative - the time-bound, horizontal strand - but already casts the piercing light of divine meaning on its outcome - the transcendent strand - we know that what is happening is not merely a "finishing," but an accomplishment. "When

Jesus saw that everything was accomplished," John writes, "he bowed his head, and gave up his spirit."

What would be meaningless - absurd, or just a mistake (the killing of the wrong man for the wrong reasons) - is found here in John, with unambiguous confidence, to be God's final accomplishment, the salvation of the world. It is like looking down the back of Jesus's dying, sweating, neck from above, as St John of the Cross once sketched the dying Christ, knowing that, despite all appearances, everything is exactly in order.

But this confidence is easy for us to get wrong. We can assent to it notionally, but when it comes to its implications for our own lives it seems empty and extrinsic, as if John's Jesus was some sort of Superman on whom the constraints of time and space did not really impinge, and whose magic has little to do with the humiliating details of our own lives. He lives in the world of archetypal meaning; we live in the world of banality. His suffering is heroic and transformative; ours is merely pathetic and meaningless. But herein lies the rub. For our own worst experiences of pain, suffering or grief so often have this quality of irreducible meaninglessness. If we could fit them mentally into some box bound for glory, they would not have the power over us that they do; they would not be the suffering that they are to us. If we could bend our minds to see that this - my private grief, my unshakeable guilt, my rocky marriage, my repetitive stupidity, my addiction, my bad lot of fate or genes - were the stuff out of which the deepest human fulfilment could even now be wrought, we might concoct a most satisfying secular psychology to make us cheerful again. But this we cannot do. For it seems impossible for us to believe that God, being God, has allowed me to undergo this agony, this loss, this burden, this illness, to be the perfect anvil on which is being hammered out my salvation, my own "glory." And yet this is what John's Passion story, rightly understood, is saying. It is not saying that once there was a Superman who got around all this negative stuff of mine and supposedly effected an extrinsic miracle of some sort that I really cannot fathom. Nor is it saying that suffering is a good in itself from which I should not do my best to escape where possible, with all the good clinical and therapeutic tools that the modern world offers me. What it is saying is that, in the God/Man Jesus, the inescapable and meaningless suffering of my particular life intersects with the transcendent power of salvation and is lifted up, "handed over," to be shot through with Christ's glory. Here, and only here - not in some spurious escapist fantasy-land - do I learn the real way of peace and joy. Here, and only here, do I walk the way of Jesus, through death to new life. So when we bend and venerate the cross on Good Friday, there are several things that I think we must be clear, if John's gospel is right, that we are not doing. We are not assenting to ongoing injustice, violence, or abuse in our world: that would be negligence or cowardice. We are not voting for a passive acceptance of the misuse of power: that would be masochism. We are not saying that human agony and suffering are alright after all, or that by some magic of mind-over-matter I can grit my teeth and see them through to the other side: that would be stoicism. No, when we make this bodily obeisance each year, we are saying in the only way we can - not just with our mind (which is often confused and doubting) but with our whole being - that all our hope resides in something already done, done by the God/Man on a dark

hour long ago and once for all. Often we cannot feel it for the darkness, let alone see it. Often we are overwhelmed by our own pain and that of others, our own sin and that of others. But God has done what only God can do, and in the eye of the storm there is already that still place of triumph which John calls Jesus's cosmic "glory," and which he holds out to us also. It is the "finishing" that Jesus does, which is not just a finishing but the reaching of the goal. And while we wait in this dead time of Holy Saturday for the coming of the resurrection, therein we place our hope. "It is accomplished" - tetelestai. Amen.

Sarah Coakley is the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University and Canon of Ely Cathedral.