

Friday, April 03, 2026

Good Friday

The Celebration of the Lord's Passion

5:30 pm

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A Sermon by

Professor Sarah Coakley

on

Isaiah 52:13-53:6; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

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Address 6: Death*From 'The Journey of Desire: Passion, Temptation and Transformation'*

'When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said "It is finished"' (John 19.30) In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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There is all the difference in the world – is there not? – between just 'finishing' something, getting it over and done ('I want this to be over', we say), and 'completing' it in the fullest sense: 'accomplishing' it, bringing it to its *final* goal and fulfillment. In the Passion according to John, which we hear at this Liturgy of the Day every Good Friday, 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 John uses has this full and rich evocation – of goal, of triumph: *tetelestai* ('the goal is reached'). Christ 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 – and even divine – 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 specially need *John's* Jesus today, 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 – a surd, 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' dying, sweating, neck from above, as St. John of the Cross once sketched the dying Christ, knowing that – despite all appearances – everything is exactly as God desires and plans.

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 (as we have reflected so often throughout our Passiontide meditations this week), 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 fulfillment 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 darndest 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 fantasy land of escape, 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 in a few moments, 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 all right 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 others', our own sin and 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. It is this to which we assent, in hope, when we bend our own bodies to the cross, and leave all our own anguish, our own unfulfilled desires, at its foot. And while we wait in this dead time for the coming of the resurrection, therein we place our hope. 'It is accomplished': *tetelestai*. Amen.
