

“It is finished.” When I was growing up, I always thought that Jesus meant ‘It’s over.’ But in John’s gospel, this is a cry of victory. A better translation would be “It is accomplished.” Or “it is completed,” or “it is perfected.” The Latin version is best of all; even if we don’t know any Latin, we can still get it: “Consummatum est.” It is consummated. Even as death engulfs Him, Jesus is His Father’s victorious Son. The Father’s plan and purpose are consummated. (adapted from THE UNDOING OF DEATH, Fleming Rutledge, p. 202)

Jesus has triumphed, succeeded, run the toughest race of all to its finish. When He speaks these words, He’s the winner in the Olympic marathon – throwing up His arms in triumph at the finish line; except in this case both his exuberance of spirit and His arms are nailed down so that His utterance of triumph is not the fist-pump of an Olympic victor, but like the cry of a newborn baby that’s finally succeeded in getting through the birth canal. It is a startling triumph, but one that, for a time, has the victor lying in blood, tears, and helplessness.

Jesus has won, but it has cost Him His life, tested His faith to the limit, lost Him His popularity, scattered His friends, shrouded His life in misunderstanding, left Him looking compromised, and isolated in an unspeakable loneliness. It’s not easy then to pump your fist in triumph, even when you’ve won, especially since your victory isn’t evident to anyone who isn’t journeying inside of this with you. To everyone else, this looks like defeat, the worst kind of defeat.

So what is ‘finished?’

At one level, what’s finished is Jesus’ own struggle with doubt, fear, and loneliness. What was that struggle? The painful, lonely, crushing discrepancy He habitually felt between the warmth and ideals inside His heart and the coldness and despair He met in the world. Everything inside of Him believed that, in the end, always, it is better to give yourself over to love than to hatred, to affirmation than to jealousy, to gentleness of heart than to bitterness, to honesty than to lying, to fidelity than to compromise, to forgiveness than to revenge. Everything about Him was a testimony that the reality of God, immaterial and fanciful though it may seem, is in the end more real than the undeniable reality of our physical bodies and our physical world. And finally, everything about Him pointed uncompromisingly toward the ‘road less taken’ and revealed that real love means carrying your solitude and love at a high level.

But for Him, as for us, it wasn’t easy to live that out. As Scripture says, sometimes it gets dark in the middle of the day, sometimes we find ourselves very much alone in what we believe in, and sometimes God seems far away and dead. Faith and love aren’t easy because they feel empty and fanciful whenever they’re betrayed. Only when they’re persevered in will they work and prove that they’re real.

Jesus, though, did persevere in them, and when He utters the words, “It is finished,” it’s a statement of triumph, not just of His own faith, but of love, truth, and God. He’s taken God at His word, risked everything on faith and, despite the pain it’s brought, is dying with no regrets. The struggle for faith, for Him, is finished. He’s succeeded; He’s crossed the finish line.

But there’s a second level of meaning to His words. “It is finished” also means that the reign of sin and death is finished. It is the end of an order of things wherein we live our lives believing that everyday joys eventually give way to darkness and the underworld, paranoia and sin unmask trust and goodness as naïve, the reality of the physical world and this life is all there is, compromise and infidelity trump everything else, and death is more real than hope. This order is also finished; it is exposed as unreal, as a lie, by love, fidelity,

gentleness, trust, childlikeness, vulnerability, and the paradoxical power of a God who, in the deeper recesses of things, works more by underwhelming than by overpowering.

“It is finished!” Jesus uttered those words when He realized that, despite all the pain and sin in the world, the center does hold, love can be trusted, God is real, and because of that, in the end, “All shall be well, and every manner of being shall be well” as Julian of Norwich put it. The forces of sin and death are finished because we can, in full maturity and utter realism, believe in the sun even when it isn’t shining, in love even when we don’t feel it, and in God, even when God is silent. Faith and God deliver on their promise.

Mohandas Gandhi in a remarkable passage once wrote: “When I feel despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible. But in the end they always fall. Think of it, always.”

Many things were finished on the cross, including tyranny and murder. God wins in the end. Always. Amen. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, *THE PASSION AND THE CROSS*, p. 57-59)