5th Wednesday in Lent
Bessemer - 1959

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

In Nomine Jesu

John 19: 28 I thirst.

All of us have learned how difficult it is to understand fully the sorrow and suffering of another person. To go beyond understanding to feeling is even more difficult. When tragedy strikes a friend, we can and should be sympathetic. We should suffer with him. However, we have also learned that no matter how hard we may try we can really never enter the inner recesses of the heart of another. This is where the last and deepest suffering takes place. Sometime ago the story was reported of a little child who was run over by a truck driven by a friend of the boy's family. Anyone who read the story was deeply shocked. Hearts went out to the parents and to the man who was so innocently the cause of the tragedy. Many expressed their sympathy. And yet the last measure of suffering and sorrow was beyond the reach of words. The final barrier between their lives and ours could not be crossed.

Of course, God could enter into this sorrow - right into the very heart of it - but not we. There are always inner recesses and corners of the human personality which another person cannot reach. It is inevitably and tragically true that the ultimate sorrow of the human heart and soul must be borne alone. I am certain you will understand why I mention this. The task we have set for ourselves in our Lenten worship tonight is even more difficult. We must try to understand as clearly as we possibly can the suffering of a Man, not a man in our own community but on a Cross six thousand miles away in distance and almost two thousand years away in time. Furthermore, this suffering Man was not only man but also God. We must understand His suffering not only with our minds, but with our hearts. We must really sympathize with - suffer with - at least a part of His sorrow. Some of His sorrow must become our sorrow, and some of His pain our pain.

Now someone may ask: Why? Why must we do this? There is only one answer. That suffering Man on the Cross was and is our Savior. All of us were in His heart that memorable Good Friday and that is a way which we can never fully understand on this side of eternity. We were a part of the agony and torment of the Cross. The sin which we committed so easily and so carelessly yesterday or

today was with Him on the Cross. It was the basic, ultimate and terrible reason for the drops of blood, the agony of His soul, the torment of His pain-racked body, and His unquenchable thirst. The words of the great spiritual Were You There When They Crucified My Lord? come to us, even after all these years, with an insistent and powerful urgency. Yes! Yes! We were there.

For almost six hours now the Lamb of God has been hanging on the Cross. It is near the end. His whole body throbs with an aching, tearing pain. His arms and legs are torn from their sockets. Every bone in His body is stretched out of joint. The blood still flows from the flaming, burning wounds of His head and hands and feet. But more than that, He has literally been going through all hell - for us. In the torment of His God-forsakenness, the whole creation hides its face. For three hours now the sun has refused to shine. On the fields of Bethlehem the glory of the Lord shone through the midnight darkness to the honor of the Dayspring from on high; on Golgotha it becomes dark at bright noonday because the Light of the world sinks in death, the prince of darkness exercises his power, and God sits in judgment on the sin of the world - our sin. At last, knowing that the end was at hand, the Savior lifts His head and says, I thirst. The thirst of His soul for the blessed reunion with His heavenly Father revealed itself in the burning thirst of His tortured, dying body. At this moment, feeling the intense loneliness and anguish of being forsaken of God, Christ could say with the psalmist, As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? David had foretold the extreme suffering and pain: I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of My bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and My tongue cleaveth to My jaws; and Thou hast brought Me into the dust of death.

Hearing the cry of Jesus, one of the soldiers soaked a sponge with sour wine - the common drink of soldiers in that day - and, after putting it on a stalk of hyssop, he pressed it to the sacred lips of Jesus. It is the last offering of

humanity to its dying Redeemer! Look at Him as again and again He cranes His neck to moisten His fevered, swollen lips with the lowliest, poorest drink in the world - the sour, bitter wine which was more vinegar than wine - the drink of hardened and rough soldiers and poor peasants. One might conceive of all the waters of the world drying up at this moment. Then, as one devoted soul has put it, then all cool springs which flowed from the rocky heights stopped in their courses and plunged into the deep, lamenting loudly that they were not permitted to quench their Creator's thirst. What a miserable drink Jesus accepted at the time when His love thirsted for the salvation of sinners!

Certainly there had never been anything like this in the long and bitter story of man. It may be that for some of us in this church now there will be in the years ahead some dark valleys, some agony of soul, some great loneliness. But we shall never know anything like this: all the world's aching sadness, this drying up of the fountains of life, this unimaginable sickening of soul, this quenchless thirst. This was God and man suffering, and God can suffer more than men. Realizing this, we are now beginning to touch the real meaning of the Cross, the reason for it, and the purpose of it. Perhaps there should be the warning at this point that many people will not want to see the true meaning of the Savior's agony and thirst. There may be various reasons for this reluctance to get close to it. Primarily, however, the reason lies in the fact that the true meaning of the agony and suffering and pain is intimately, terribly, and eternally personal. It strikes every human being that has ever lived. It concerns every one of us in this church - and certainly we do not like to be directly involved in such terror of soul and such unquenchable thirst.

And just how are we involved? What is the real cause of His agony? Anyone who is called to preach during Lent must say it very simply and clearly, again and again. It is the old, old story of sin and grace. What racked His body in a torrent of pain, pierced His soul, made His tongue thick and swollen so that it stuck to the roof of His mouth in fiery thirst, and painted the twisted

expression of eternal agony on His face was sin. There were voices, far and unheard, echoing around Calvary that Day: God hath made Him to be sin for us. The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. In some mysterious way known only to God, all the timeless sin and sorrow of all life and history gathered in His soul that Day on Calvary. All of it was there. None of it was missing. He bore it all, and He bore it alone. No one was with Him in the wine press of divine judgment. Now we must again make this very personal and very up to date. That bit of gossip in which we indulged a few days ago; that lingering impurity in our lives; the hate in our hearts; the lovelessness and selfishness of our actions - all of these, all of these were on His head that Day, torturing Him with unbearable thirst. He was sin! He was sin and evil incarnate during that hour. And having said all that, we still shall never really know what it fully means, because it was one of the great unique experiences of the God-man. It is the heart of our entire Christian faith - the total transfer of sin to the bleeding, thirsting Christ on the Cross.

There is, however, one way in which we can understand it. We may never fully grasp its meaning for Him, but its meaning for us is perfectly clear. Our Lord thirsted that you and I with the woman at Jacob's well might never thirst, that we might drink of the rivers of life forevermore. Our Savior denied Himself the pleasure of the streams of Paradise which were at His command, and took the vinegar, that we might be refreshed and drink forever the sweet wine of eternal joy. We can leave this church today quiet, free, and forgiven by faith in His atoning suffering as our Substitute. Our faces can now be calm and peaceful because His face was torn by agony. We can look up to God because He looked down into the lowest corners of hell. Every evil thing that worries us, every hidden sin, every fault we can leave with Him on the Cross. Thank God! - we can leave it with Him whose mouth is convulsed in the struggle of death. He took care of it It is His and no longer ours. This, you will understand, is the Christian religion - the religion of atonement, of redemption and forgiveness. And there is

nothing else like it under the sun!

Perhaps there is one more thing that we should take from this service today. We should carry with us, too, the high and firm resolve to do a little better in the future than we have in the past. Pascal once said: Jesus Christ is in agony until the end of the world. We might change his words to read: Jesus Christ is in dire thirst until the end of the world. As He was thirsty for water on the Cross, so today the world is filled by His consuming thirst for the souls of men. He reaches out for them through His Word and Sacraments. He follows them to the ends of the earth and into the corners of sin. The Cross is the ultimate evidence of His thirsting love for the sin-torn hearts of men. And so today His agony, His thirst, is heard in all the sins of our time, in our carelessness with God and the suffering of all people throughout the world. We were not present at Calvary on that first Good Friday to give Him water. We can, however, even at this late hour in the time of men, help to quench His thirst for human souls. We can offer our hearts and lives to His service. We can take part in the great work of drawing human souls to the Cross. And when we do that, we help to quench His divine thirst for the hearts of men. There is no greater way to live than to hear in all the pain and agony and horror of our time the echo of His agony, His thirst, to resolve to help wherever we can, and to hear above the roar and confusion of our mad world His voice again and again: Fear not; for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine!

Amen.