

Good Friday 2018, March 30, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt Strause

“It is finished.” Jesus’ final words, according to the Gospel of St. John. How might we understand this last utterance before Jesus bowed his head and died?

It is finished. The long difficult vigil at grandmother’s bed side strained the whole family. Her illness prolonged by a seemingly endless procession of tests and operations, doctors and nurses. For weeks she lay there diminishing into a person barely recognized as the sweet, loving grannie they always knew. Her difficulty breathing, the sores that started to break out on her skin. In the final days her family even started to talk in hushed tones about her funeral while she lay there seemingly unhearing any of their words. In the end as she took her last shallow halting breath the thought went through everyone’s mind, “That’s over with. Her suffering is ended. We can celebrate her life, but life moves on.”

It is finished. The idea first came to the sculptor like a brilliant flash. It could only be called one of those “light bulb above the head” moments; an instant of pure inspiration. For months she labored in her studio, keeping all visitors who desired to get a glimpse of her creation locked outside. Now the moment of unveiling on the college green. A dedicatory speech by the dean, a poem written just for the occasion. The shroud pulled away, sighs of appreciation, applause and acclaim. “It’s finished. That’s it. It’s what I saw in my mind before I began to work.”

It is finished. Is it for Jesus the end of the road after a long, suffering ordeal? Or is it the completion of something begun long ago, the accomplishment of a series of inspirational moments of supreme dedication now held up for the world to admire?

It is finished. It is the end. But of what? What is finished? What has come to an end? Richard John Neuhaus writes in his book “Death on a Friday Afternoon:” “This is the cross point in the Great Story, from the ‘In the beginning’ of creation to the last words of the bible, ‘Amen. Com, Lord Jesus!’ At the cross point, everything is retrieved from the past and everything is anticipated from the future, and the cross is the point of entry to the heart of God from whom and for whom, quite simply, everything is. Here is the beginning and the end come together, along with everything along the way from the beginning to the end.” (page 187)

The cross of Jesus stands at the center of everything there is; all of the world’s history, and all of the histories that makes up the narrative of each person’s life. The triumphs, the tragedies, the pain and sorrow, all find their interpretation through this singular event in the story of the world. It is finished means it is settled, certain, decided, complete and incontestable. Nothing can happen that can now undo it. “The worst has already happened. On a certain Friday afternoon it could truly be said, “God is dead.” And there is no catastrophe beyond the death of God.” (quoted from Neuhaus, pg. 191)

Here, in this moment, as Jesus speaks for the last time, “It is finished,” all of the glory of God is gone. The magnificence and majesty which brought into being all of creation is now utterly and finally silenced. We can truly say, in a strange and paradoxical way, “God is dead.” And it is in this dying, this giving up the spirit and declaring that all is finished that God finally identifies himself with his creation.

At the foot of the cross all of our endings, the isolation, lost opportunities, failed good intentions, diminishing strength and hope are gathered up in Jesus’ embrace. Ronald Rolheiser writes, “Whenever we find ourselves outside the circle of health and vibrancy,

on a sick bed alone, with the sure knowledge that, despite the love and support of family and friends, in the end it is us, by ourselves, who face disability and disfigurement, who have to lose a breast or an organ to surgery, who face chemotherapy and maybe death, when we are alone inside of that, alone inside of fear,” Jesus meets us at the cross.

“Whenever we find ourselves alone inside duty, bound by moral chains we cannot explain, tied down in our freedom so as to be seen as too timid, too frigid, too afraid to pick up our own lives, when innocence and duty are seen as a weakness, when circumstance steals away our dreams and what we would want for ourselves we need to give to others,” Jesus meets us at the cross.

It is finished. God’s final and last word. A word beyond which all other words and events, beginnings and endings must find their meaning. For all are embraced in these outstretched arms, all are gathered up into a dying yet complete love. Amen.