

“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son. Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might he fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar; and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.”—John 19:25-30.

THREE WORDS FROM THE CROSS
A Sermon by Theodor Zahn

WE are now standing beneath the Cross on which Jesus is dying. The Good Friday bells have called us hither; the Word of God must keep us all here. How many there are who gather with us in spirit round the Cross on this day and at this hour! Many come to church on Good Friday who never come at any other time! All that was preached to us last Sunday is made plain to each one to-day. He, who made Himself of no reputation, and humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even unto the death of the Cross, has been highly exalted by God, who hath also given Him a name which is above every name. There is no other day in the whole of the Church’s year when so many bend the knee to Jesus Christ, as the day kept in memory of His deepest humiliation, His most painful death, and all gaze, devoutly at least and full of awe, on that

“Bleeding Head so wounded,
Reviled and put to scorn.”

But it is just because there are so many and such very different types of men who gather round the Cross on Good Friday, that the question must be asked: What have you come hither to see or to hear? Surely you have not come merely to hear an address which some one may deliver on the death of the Lord? That would not be right, my friends. Any voice of man, endeavouring to assert itself in the Church of God, has no right here; and, verily, every address that man can give is only foolish, idle talk, if it aspires to be anything more than a signpost, to point all eyes to the form of the crucified Saviour.

But what do ye see there? A man suffering inhuman tortures, and wrestling for hours with death in the greatest agony. Truly, it is an awful sight that we gaze upon in Golgotha; the more vividly we picture it to ourselves the more it tortures us, and it does not become any more helpful to us when it brings to our remembrance all the unspeakable torments which, both before and after, have been suffered by other men at the hand of man. The effect of such an awful spectacle is a feeling of stupefaction at our own helplessness in the presence of such an awful mystery in the Divine government of the world. It does not help us either to remember that He who bore all this agony was perfectly innocent, yea, that it was the only Holy One whose sufferings were enhanced by coarse blasphemy. This thought may move us to tender pity, as it did the women of Jerusalem, who had already wept over Jesus on the way to the Cross. Possibly, too, we may have a suspicion that the sin, which brought Jesus to the Cross, may have its likeness in our hearts, as in those of the crowds who smote their breasts as they returned from the place where Jesus had been put to death. The silent figure of the Saviour does not lead us on to a festival, the uplifting of our souls, or the giving of any explanation. But He who hangs upon the Cross is not silent. He opens His mouth seven times in articulate speech, and, God be thanked, men were there who heard those words, and preserved them for us. The words of the dying Jesus are words of eternal life. They lay bare for us the heart of Him who died, and raise us up above our own thoughts and feelings. It is true that those who were determined to be the enemies of Jesus did not understand

His words, neither will such men ever understand them. When He cried, "Eli, Eli, My God, My God," they imagined He called for Elias, and mocked Him. But the malefactor on the cross beside Him understood His words, and drew comfort from them when in the pangs of death. Even the heathen centurion felt that the words of Jesus transfigured the sufferings of this good and righteous man. How differently these words must have gone home to the hearts of the faithful few who had ventured to stay beneath the Cross! They accepted them as a costly legacy, and delivered them unto us, that we too may acknowledge what took place for us upon the Cross. It is true these words reveal to us human consciousness of pain, human moaning, questioning and supplication; but when we listen more closely, they make known, through all this human suffering, Divine strength of will, a deed of Divine might. Let us meditate on the dying hour of the Lord Jesus, in the light of the three Words from the Cross, which John, the Evangelist, the only Apostle who remained for a time beneath the Cross, has preserved for us in our text for to-day. These three Words have a threefold lesson—

First: Jesus died in tender love for His own.

Secondly: He died in the liberty and power of the Son of God.

Thirdly: By dying He completed the work of His life.

I.

The first Word, which we hear to-day from the lips of the dying Saviour, was spoken to His mother, Mary. It was not the first that Jesus had spoken from the Cross. John the Evangelist passes quickly over the first hours of the suffering on the Cross, as the other Evangelists had already described them sufficiently. At mid-day darkness spreads over Golgotha, and all is still beneath the Cross. The chief enemies have satisfied their lust for revenge; the crowd of the curious melts away, so that His kinsfolk, who till now had stood afar off, can draw near—the mother of Jesus, with her sister and two other women, and John, the disciple whom Jesus had drawn most closely to Himself. They come close under the Cross, and, by their love, these faithful ones gain strength to look up into the face of the suffering Lord. Then the sword, of which Mary had already been told, pierces her heart. She sees the son she had borne in the agonies of death, and what a son! Though the Evangelists tell us so little of the relation between Mary and Jesus, yet this much is certain, that He had been more than a son to her from the beginning. The light of her life is about to be extinguished. She is dumb in her sorrow; she has nothing to say or to give to her son. But when He who is dying looks at His mother, and at the friend who stands near her, He says to her: "Woman, behold thy son!" and to the disciple He says: "Behold thy mother!" This is human faithfulness and love even unto death, the tenderest fulfilment of a son's duty to his mother." Mary had other sons, the brethren of the Lord, who are not infrequently mentioned in the Gospels with their mother. They had grown up under the same roof with Jesus, and later, when the Lord had entered on His public life, they formed a household with their mother. We might think that, even after the death of her first-born, Mary would not have been left desolate. But the brethren of Jesus did not stand beneath the Cross. Not many months before, they had opposed the Lord, who was their brother, doubting, criticising, and almost scoffing. In her sorrow for the dying Jesus, Mary was forsaken by her other sons. How lonely she would have felt in her own house during the long period of mourning for Him who was dead! She would not have starved, they would have given her daily bread, but the want of her soul, the void which had been made by the death of Jesus, could not have been filled by any of her own family. Only a brother of Jesus in heart and mind could be a support to her; only one who had lived through the awful hour of His death with her, could give her comfort during the years that she no longer had Jesus. Such an one was not wanting. The disciple John, the only man who with His mother had ventured beneath the Cross, and had faithfully endured there in love and sorrow, deserved to be called a brother of Jesus and a son of Mary; he was to be the

protector and guardian of the mother in her declining years.

But how does all this concern us? It is certainly affecting to see how the Lord, in the midst of the agonies of death, thinks of His duty as a son, and fulfils a son's duty in the tenderest way. This also may be for us "a mirror of innocence, and a seal of love and truest faithfulness." The thought might suggest itself: Blessed was the mother who had such a son! yea, blessed was the woman for whom the Saviour of the world cared so faithfully in His dying hour. This is all true, and yet it is not the whole truth of this Word from the Cross. You remember what Jesus Himself said, when a woman in the midst of the crowd called the mother blessed who had given birth to, and had nourished, this son. Then said Jesus: "Yea, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it." We are now hearing the Word of God. Blessed are we, if we hear it aright and keep it. The Word of the dying Lord Jesus to His mother is verily a Word of God to us. For if we hear it aright, the words that express the love and faithfulness of a son to His earthly mother, reveal also Divine love and care for all, who, like Mary, cling to the Cross and the Crucified. Jesus said: "Woman, behold thy son."

Is that the way, then, that such a loving son should speak to His mother in deep affliction? Once before Jesus had already spoken thus to Mary, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, when Mary thought that, as a mother, she might remind her son of His duty and urge Him on to action. Then Jesus checked His mother with the words: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" The words of the Son, in the hour of painful parting, do not sound so harsh and severe as at the joyful feast. Still our Lord does not say, "My poor dear mother," but He speaks to her as He would to any of the other women standing beneath the Cross. The natural bond, which links mother to son, gives no preference to this blessed woman when the office of Jesus is in question. There she stands as one only of Eve's many daughters, and Jesus is the Son of God, whose work and suffering concern all the children of Adam. Even now, while Jesus is hanging on the Cross, He is carrying on the work of His calling: He is even now preparing to carry out His last and greatest work when dying. His mother is to Him but one of the many human souls for whom He was giving His life as a ransom. She was a woman, and ought to know it. He was not dying as the dearly-loved son of His mother; but He was dying for her and for all who cling to Him as the only-begotten Son of God. Till His last breath, Jesus fulfilled His duty as a son, as He fulfilled all His other duties; but by fulfilling them He released Himself from them all. While setting His earthly home in order, and giving His mother another son in His stead, He is already soaring up in spirit to the Home of His Heavenly Father, and pointing the way thither to His mother, His disciples, and all His future disciples, both men and women, who hear His Word. Whilst He was living in the flesh, He was near to one and far from another, as the son of His mother, the brother of His brethren, the especial friend of John the Evangelist, and a member of the Jewish people. All others were far from Him; His word, His love and His care could not reach them. Now that He is exalted, He can and will draw them all unto Himself. You must not imagine that Mary lost anything thereby, or that it pained her to be called a woman by her dying son. Neither, on the other hand, must you envy her, as though we could lay no claim to the riches of the protecting love which was vouchsafed to the mother of the Lord in these words. Jesus is the same yesterday and to-day. He who on the Cross thought so tenderly of the special need of the one woman who was His mother, is the same who, having broken through the limitations of His earthly life, passed through death and hell to heavenly glory. He is not poorer in love to each individual soul, but richer in power to enable all to feel it.

II.

But we are now still standing beneath the Cross, and watching the Lord's suffering. Burning thirst is added to the pain of His wounds and the dislocation of His limbs. Jesus does not hide His agony from man. He says: "I thirst." This complaint is a request to His executioners, and His request touches a

compassionate heart. One of the soldiers fills a sponge with vinegar, and reaches it up to His mouth on a reed, and moistens His parched lips. Mocking words are heard again, as we learn from the other Evangelists; but still it was the fulfilment of the earnest request of Him who was dying, and it was a work of mercy to give Him the vinegar. It was but a poor beverage: the Lord on the Cross was not so well cared for as our dying ones, to whom we give the choicest that earth can provide. Still, it was the refreshment that He required. But why did He require it? Had the agony at last become too much for Him? Had He also said, as one of us in our weakness and impatience might say: "I cannot endure it any more, I cannot bear it any longer"? So judged the heathenish enemies of Christianity sixteen hundred years ago of the words, "I thirst." But the Evangelist John, who was standing beneath the Cross, and who has preserved this Word for us, knew and understood better. It was not in impatience, nor in failure of obedience in suffering that Jesus complained of thirst, but in the full consciousness that thus He was doing His Father's will. For what do we read? "After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith: I thirst." He bore all the suffering that man could lay upon Him; He emptied the cup of sorrow to the very dregs; He experienced what it meant to be no longer conscious of the help and nearness of God, and thus, forsaken of God, He also experienced how wide the rent was, and how deep the chasm, which separated the Holy and Living God from sinful and dying men. All this He must have felt the more deeply, because the purer His soul the more unnatural it was for Him to be bereft of the helpful nearness of His God and Father and of His efficacious grace. But in this conflict, so full of suffering, though He had felt all the pains of body and soul, as only man can feel them, He had gained the victory, He had not murmured or doubted, and when He saw and felt only the very opposite of the love of God, His faith had not wavered. God had remained His Father and His God through all His pain and suffering. Then an inner voice said to Him: "The suffering has been completed."

Only one more thing remained that must be done, that the will of God, as He had read in the Holy Scriptures, might be fulfilled; in all the previous suffering there was still one more thing which had not yet been done. It was written in the Scriptures that the suffering Servant of God would give His life as a sacrifice for sin.

Long before Jesus had made the will of God His own, and had said that He had come to give His life as a ransom for many. In ministering love to His brethren, and in free obedience to the will of God, He must and He will lay down His life. Now this must be done, now this holy offering must be made. That He might be able to offer it as was fitting, and as He intended, He said: "I thirst." Therefore He asks and receives the reviving draught. He will not pass over to another life, fainting and unconscious, but, in full possession of His senses and with His mind quite clear, He will lay down His life as a sacrifice. What kind of a sacrifice would that be which was not offered with a free will and a clear mind? What would be the worth of the gift of the most holy life, if it was not really laid down, but wrested from the helpless by external force? The unique greatness of this deed, the reconciliation of the world by this sacrifice, consisted in the fact that it was a deed of free will, a deed of love for lost mankind, of obedience to the Heavenly Father. No other man has ever so died; but the Son of God could not have died otherwise. Before His suffering, even He Himself said: "No man taketh My life from me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." Jesus proved the truth of these words when, revived by the draught of vinegar, He cried with a loud voice, and commended His spirit into the hands of His Father.

Such a sacrifice has only once been offered. How little do we men in general understand how to offer sacrifices! We desire, by nature, to have and to enjoy, to live and to assert ourselves in the battle of life. It is education which first teaches us that we must, now and then, forego what is pleasant to us. Man has a calling, and his duty bids him do what is not pleasant. To duty is added love, which awakens the heart of man, under many forms; it not only commands but also teaches us to offer up our own well-being for the good of others. But when we subtract everything which, even in the best of

lives, only looks like a sacrifice of renunciation, while really it is an act of self-love or ambition, or the forced result of necessity, there is not very much left over. We all love life; we tremble for our lives when they are in danger; with our last breath we cling to life, this sinful, mortal life, as if it were our greatest good. And if a man volunteers as a soldier, and then goes to certain death, when sometimes the death of one may be the salvation of many, yet still he does not give up his life, but allows it to be taken from him. Jesus, only, gave up His life freely, in love for the brethren who were not worthy of that love, and in obedience to the will of God. Thereby He made an offering that was well pleasing to God. Thereby He atoned for all the disobedience and self-seeking of mankind.

III.

Jesus finished His life's work by the act of His holy death. But before He bowed His head and died, He said: "It is finished." Even before He called for the reviving draught He knew that all was now finished. But men were to hear from His own mouth that it was in this certainty that He died. These words became true in their fullest sense when the sacrifice of His holy life ascended up to heaven. His mouth was then closed, but the Word which He had spoken immediately before, resounds in heaven and on earth. The spirits before the throne of God in heaven, and the community of the faithful on earth say: "The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive glory and honour and power." In fact, there is nothing better for us to do than to join with them, and say: "Blessed is He who has completed that which none of us could do, who for us has entered the breach, and in the power of His eternal Spirit has laid down His life, in order to take it again, and to give to us poor creatures the life once laid down and taken up again."

My beloved, I know well that there is much that will be questioned, thought of, and argued, before even one hundred men can praise the crucified Saviour for His completed work in the same sense and with the same meaning. But the chief question for us is simply: Either the Word of the dying Lord Jesus, "It is finished," is true, and true also are the echoes of this Word by the angels in heaven, and in the songs of His community on earth; or they are untrue, and we must all die in our sins without hope and without exception. We do much to please ourselves; we do something, perhaps, that is useful to other men, and that gives them joy, but we finish nothing; we never come to the end of anything that is either good or bad. If we flatter ourselves to-day, that we have succeeded in something or other, which is perfect of its kind, perhaps years hence we may ourselves smile over our work and our self-deception. And it is only with reference to isolated words and deeds that a sensible man can indulge in such thoughts. All that is most successful is but piece-work, a fragment of the whole which none can accomplish or hope to see. Not one of us will be able to say on his death-bed: "I have finished all that was given me to do on earth. I am ready to go with the fruit of my life, and the work of my life, to the other world, where men do not praise and blame, flatter and deceive, but where God judges." But why is the work of our life only piece-work? Because we want to be something in ourselves, and cannot get rid of self-seeking in our own strength; because we cannot make up our minds to give ourselves wholly to God, and lovingly and freely to offer our lives to God and our brethren, only to receive them back again, all the richer. We finish nothing because we are born the servants of sin. We may even realise this partially without faith in the crucified Saviour; but it is impossible to ignore it, when we gaze with honest hearts on the dying Jesus. There we see and also hear from His own mouth what is wanting in us--a human life which lacks nothing for its completion. That mouth from which none ever heard a lie, or a word of vain pride, said, "It is finished": that is in itself already a pledge for us of the truth of this His Word. All had been accomplished for which He knew that He was born, in so far as it could and must be accomplished during His walk on earth. When dying He looked upon the work of His life, and also upon His suffering, and was satisfied. But what was the meaning of that to Him? Jesus did not come to be ministered unto and to be wondered at, or to show us, who bring nothing to perfection, an example that should put us to shame, of how much that was perfect and great could be accomplished

in a short life. He came in self-denying love to serve mankind, to seek the lost, to bring back the wanderers to the way of God, to appear for them as their Intercessor, and, lastly, to offer up for all the most powerful of all prayers, namely, His death, that He might offer to the Father in heaven the holy sacrifice of His life.

According to the will of Him who offered it, this most perfect sacrifice, of which all other sacrifices ever brought by men to propitiate God are but shadowy types and images, is only available for those who accept its efficacy. It is effectual and powerful for all who do not simply stand in imagination beneath the Cross, but who find room in their hearts for that grace of God to which the dying Jesus bore witness by word and deed. If we take our stand in earnest beneath the Cross, we then feel, before all things, that we are very far from being of the same mind as Jesus Christ, and that there is much in our inner and outer lives which affects us powerfully, and which is not willing to bend beneath His finished work. But for this, too, there is help at hand, for Jesus did not complete His priestly ministry on the Cross, in order that He might no longer be the Priest of any who at any time need a priest. But He reigns in heaven as a merciful Priest for all those who need His mediation, with the same sympathising and interceding love which was revealed to us on the Cross. Because He is in heaven He is equally near to all. If we cling to His Word, we are no farther off from Him than His mother was, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. Has he not Himself said: "My mother and my brethren are those which hear the word of God and do it"? And though we have nothing more to bring to Him than the consciousness of our own need, and trust in the truth of His last Words, we may yet call on Him and pray to Him: Thou who hast finished the work of Thy life, have mercy on us, who can finish nothing. Complete in us Thy work of atonement and give us Thy peace. Amen.