

## GOOD FRIDAY, Apr. 14, 2017, Year A

- During this season of Lent, I have been referring to pictures by the painter and engraver, James Tissot. He provides us with [two images to accompany our Passion reading today \(I invite you to look at the copies](#) I have provided with your worship bulletin). [In the first](#), we find Jesus and the two thieves, as they have come to the end of their earthly lives, through crucifixion. The blessed disciple, John, who stayed until the end, clings to the base of Jesus' cross. The three Mary's, and perhaps another, lament his needless death, and their tragic loss of him. The sky is *dark*, just as Scripture reports about that awful afternoon.
- [In the second image](#), the artist provides us with an additional, and a very different, view of the *same* scene. In it, we see what we might call a *supernatural* view of the same event. In the [lower](#) portion we see the *same* women, caught in the *same* passionate lament over their loss. The sky in the *lower* portion of the painting is just as dark. But the [upper](#) portion of the painting is entirely different. It portrays Jesus at what was chronologically only a moment earlier. Yet it portrays [Jesus as eternally in the company of heaven, received into the midst of his prophetic forbears](#), as he completes his work on earth.
- In other words, the artist has provided us with a juxtaposition of two contrasting ways of seeing the same event. A scene characterized by what looks like [unstoppable suffering](#) sits next to a scene of [unending tranquility](#). And there is no contradiction between them, even if their juxtaposition seems paradoxical. We usually think of 'the *end*' of a process or of an event as its stopping point, as its *termination*. But [the end of something can also be its completion and fulfillment](#). [The end of something can mark the full realization of its potential](#). Both of Tissot's images have to do with the *end* of a particular life: both are about the moment when heaven comes to earth, when God's Kingdom comes in its fullness. And both have to do with the time when our Father's will is done on earth, as it is in heaven.

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- Notice how the prophets in the second image appear suspended in mid-air. They all hold up a scroll, representing the fruit of their ministry. They are now in the heavenly realm, the realm of God's kingdom fully realized. They gather around the cross, with the Hebrew name of God and the star of David looming in their midst.
- Tissot takes Jesus' last words as the title for the second image: "It is finished." Clearly, he wants us to see Jesus' death on the cross as *more than the stopping point* of an earthly life, and as *more than the termination* of his suffering. By choosing to represent these words from Jesus in this particular way, he is being faithful to John's Gospel. Tissot says that Jesus' last statement "summed up the whole of the word of Jesus Christ, as... foretold by the prophecies of the Old Testament, [which are] now fulfilled. It is the final completion of the Covenant between the Son of Man and God the Father, and between them and the human race. All is finished now! The work is done; the prophecies are accomplished."<sup>1</sup> *It is finished!* Let's go deeper into this mystery.
- (pause)
- "It is finished." The suffering and physical agony are now no longer manageable. The destruction of the life forces in his body is now complete. The intent by his adversaries to obliterate him from this world is coming near to being accomplished.
- "It is finished." More than the mechanisms of his physical humanity have come to a boundary and limit. His years of self-less attention to the needs of others; his turning of countless hours, days and weeks over to the concerns of people who have asked and asked, and often never truly thanked him; his months of focused energy on the work of the Kingdom, when it would have

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been so easy to put himself first; all this has come to a terminus, a stopping point characterized by brutal incompleteness.

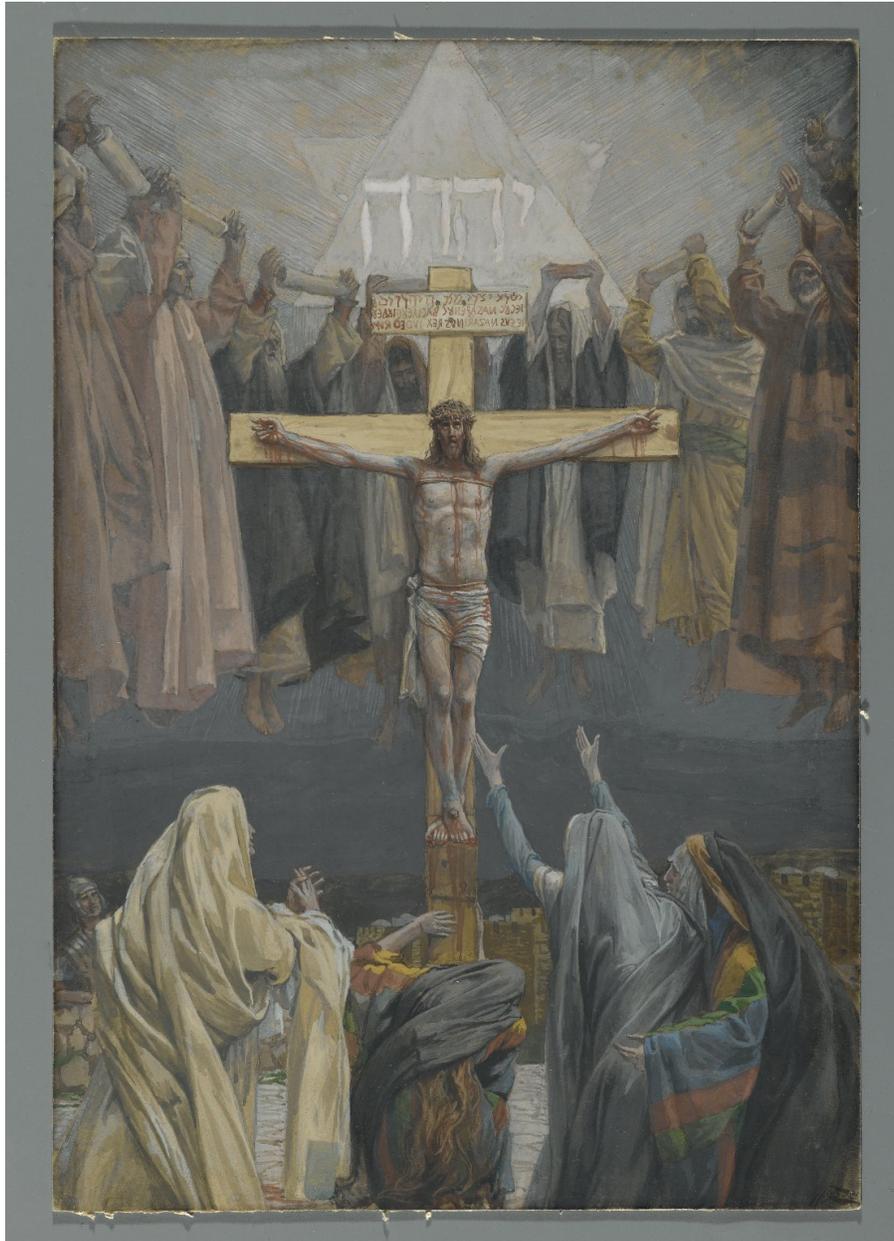
- “It is finished.” His willingness to put the mission of the Kingdom and the needs of others first, has now been tested to its limit. He has not faltered. There is nothing more they can do to him, to shake his resolve. He has been subjected to the most agonizing death human imagination can devise. Yet, he has remained true to his identity and purpose.
- “It is finished.” A proposition has been tested and proven valid. Despite the uncertainty of the human condition he shares, despite the proneness to error of the mortal humanity that is part of his being, the project of the Enemy to divert him from his holy pathway has not succeeded. The giving-over-to-the-will-of-God of at least one human life, has occurred without being derailed by the Tempter. Our revolt against the graceful order of creation has been overcome. In him, God’s unceasing mission to bring fallen humanity back from darkness, has not been proved a folly.
- “It is finished.” The human life of Jesus has come to its natural limit. The concrete power of Roman military authority, aided by the weakness of complicit Herodian vassals, appears to have triumph over the power of God in human history. The effort to end him on the Cross, took him as it found him. The sudden and surprising darkness on a Palestinian mid-afternoon presents a challenge to any ordinary hope. *Ordinary* human hope is now finished.
- (pause)
- Because it was not an ‘end’ as in the stopping point of something, the Cross takes us as it finds us – vulnerable to physical suffering through illness and injury; prone to the hurt we bring upon one another; and it finds us just as prone to cling to our suffering and hurt as a strange form of self-comforting.

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- Because it was not an 'end,' the Cross takes us as it finds us - absorbed in self-attention to our own apparent needs; giving untold hours over to concerns arising within, which displace the concerns about the world around us; and constantly placing self before the Kingdom.
- Because it was not an 'end,' the Cross takes us as it finds us - fashioning identity, meaning and purpose for ourselves and by ourselves, rather than receiving them as gifts from the Divine hand.
- Because it was not an 'end,' the Cross takes us as it finds us - ever-prone to the designs and allure of the Enemy; ever-open to distraction from pursuing higher things because of our interest in the lower; ever-amenable to dabbling in darkness rather than face the rigor of searching light.
- Because it was not an 'end,' the Cross takes us as it finds us - turned away from one another through difference or disagreement; separated from our shared humanity by our pursuit of what is individual and particular; and committed to the primacy of the *part* over the integrity of the *whole*, the holy truth which would give us our real meaning. (pause)
- Because it was not an 'end,' the Cross takes us as it finds us - *here*, in *this* place, and in *this* moment, haltingly turned toward one another, confirming that movement, and uniting us in a common purpose, and in a common focus on the redemptive work of the Lord.
- Because it was not an 'end,' the Cross takes us as it finds us. Thanks be to God for continuing mercy!



James Tissot, *He Bowed His Head and Gave Up His Spirit*



James Tissot, *It Is Finished*

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> James Tissot, *The Life of our Lord Jesus Christ* (New York, 1899), volume IV, p. 197.