The Fifth Word: “I Thirst.”

Whenever Jesus mentions thirst, there is something deeply symbolic, beyond the physical reality of thirst, in what he says. These last words of Jesus took me back to Jesus’s first mention of thirst, in Matthew 5:6:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

When I think about righteousness, about justice, and how that might look, I’m led to Jesus’s second discourse on thirst, much later in Matthew 25:35:

“for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

This is one of the clearest expressions of distributive justice I’ve ever read. No wonder Jesus, thirsty for justice and righteousness, and freedom from oppression for all, remains thirsty as he is executed for such radical beliefs.

I have been thirsty for justice my whole life. I’ve marched in protests, written letters, taught classes, and generally been a rabble-rouser. But I walked away from Christianity as a young adult because it seemed to me to be a religion not of pacifism but of passiveness, and I wanted none of it. I walked away from a religion that I thought was concerned only about the personal welfare of an individual’s own soul; a religion that measured God’s favor through what amounted to, in some cases, how much money a person had. I walked away from a religion that seemed to me to be concerned with keeping the middle class middle-classed, and doing this at the expense of anyone and anything necessary, a religion that seemed to denigrate women and that seemed to have no room for the natural word: a religion where hierarchy, and masculinity, and wealth, were all king. A religion that, in short, ignored the entirety of the second chapter of the book of James.
And then I found water. In coming back to Christianity in my middle years, I found a Jesus who belonged to an oppressed ethnic minority in an occupied, colonized territory. I found a Jesus who resisted that occupation, and did not shrink from accusing his fellow Jews who collaborated with it for their own gain, even when this cost him his life. I found a Jesus who insisted that wealth should be shared, that women should be included in leadership, that children are vital to the survival of a culture, and that we are all responsible for each other. I found a Jesus who called out abuses of power wherever he saw them, and resisted hierarchy in all its forms. I even found a Jesus who was deeply connected to the land and landscape he walked through.

I have decided to follow that Jesus.

In John 7: 37-38, Jesus says “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” But he follows this immediately by saying, “As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” In the end, my thirst is only quenched when I become that living water for others, as Jesus became that living water for me.
Prayer

God of justice, without whom there is no peace
You whose example of suffering shows us courage under threat
And the desperate need to bring water to dry places

I ask to share in the thirst of Jesus
For justice, for equality, for fair distribution of resources
For humility, for service, and for the valuing of every particle of your creation.

As I receive the living waters which come from belief in Jesus’s message and example,
May your spirit flow through me like water,
and may I always follow Jesus’s example
into the parched places of the world

Amen