

Good Friday Devotion

Holy Week 2018, Holy Trinity, Cuckfield



Introduction

This afternoon we hear Jesus' last words recorded in the gospel Passion narratives. Each of the seven reflections will be followed by a prayer, period of silence and either some music or a hymn. All of those gospel accounts offer different perspective on Jesus' life and ministry – that is also true of their Passion narratives:

Throughout **Luke's** gospel, we hear of Jesus bringing good news to the poor and oppressed. When we reach Calvary, the women lament while the soldiers mock. One of the criminals beside him blasphemes while the other is penitent. Jesus doesn't cry out in abandonment but in peaceful prayer. The Roman centurion declares him innocent, just as Pilate did. Luke

portrays the Passion as a decisive battle where Jesus emerges as the victor in peace. Jesus welcomes Judas and heals the servant, addresses the women and forgives his enemies.

In **John's** gospel, Jesus is crucified as king after the Jews have rejected him. His death comes with dignity, respect and solemnity. To some extent, John underplays the turmoil of the synoptic accounts, but in no way minimizes the reality of Jesus' death. As his account ends, Jesus' body is speared, and water and blood from his body – the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.

In **Matthew's** narrative, while the human Jesus struggles with the fear of death, the divine presence is actively present as God's plan of salvation unfolds. After all the taunts, as Jesus dies on the cross, it all ends with darkness followed by an earthquake – a dramatic end of the old world and beginning of the new.

In **Mark's** account, Jesus' silence and solitude stand out, especially when he cries out in abandonment. After his death, it is a gentile who proclaims Jesus as the 'Son of God' and the curtain of the Temple is torn apart – God should no longer be seen as confined by any one location, for he has and will continue to dwell amongst us.

All differ in their accounts of the sheer hell that human sin can create. But, against that dark background, the cross reveals just how God loves the world. Before we ponder those last words from the cross, let us just offer a prayer and ponder this vision of Golgotha:

Christ our victim
whose beauty was disfigured
and whose body torn upon the cross;
open wide your arms
to embrace our tortured world,
that we may not turn away our eyes,

but abandon ourselves to your mercy.

Amen

Barber Adagio for Strings



Luke 23:34 – When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’

Whom it was that Jesus was praying for is left to our imaginations. The context might suggest that it was the Roman soldiers who had just nailed him to the cross and were busily dividing up his clothing. On the other hand, throughout his narrative, Luke repeatedly points to the Jewish leaders acting out of ignorance. So he might have been praying for them. We could leave it that he was praying for all those involved in his death and those who scoffed, but then again, he could have been praying for all of us.

Forgiveness is what Jesus had taught his disciples throughout his ministry. In those words he certainly models a martyr's death – words repeated by Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and those who have followed. Christianity has only one legitimate weapon with which it can conquer the world and that is through love.

The moment Jesus' followers depart from this path, they are not only denying his teachings, but the manner in which he died. The power of God is limited to whatever love can achieve. Love in the end is unconquerable – you can crucify it, but it will rise again.

On Calvary, the whole heart of God is revealed. The heart of God never stops loving, even when it has been badly hurt. There on the cross, naked, with a crown of thorns on his head, nails tearing his flesh, and a crowd of sightseers taunting him, his thoughts turned to others. Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial and the agony of his mother must still have been tearing at his heart. Yet at this moment, he continued to preach forgiveness and found a reason why those who hated him might be forgiven. It seems that nobody was excluded from his forgiveness.

Standing out from that one prayer Jesus taught us is that reciprocal clause: 'Forgive us...as we forgive those.' I don't think that comes so much as one of the criteria for salvation, but as a cautionary note that harbouring one's anger and frustration can obstruct our spiritual progress in this life. Nevertheless, given the limitations of our humanity, forgiveness often seems an insurmountable task that might well extend to forgiving ourselves. The strength to accomplish heartfelt forgiveness might only come through prayer and the grace of God.

Henry Nouwen was a member of one of the L'Arche Communities, where the abled and less-abled live the common life. A prolific writer on spiritual issues, one of his books was based on Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son that we see here. Before we reflect on that, here are some of his words on the subject of forgiveness:

Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all of us love poorly. We do not even know what we are doing when we hurt others. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour – unceasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human

family. The voice that calls us the Beloved is the voice of freedom because it sets us free to love without wanting anything in return. This has nothing to do with self-sacrifice, self-denial or self-deprecation. But it has everything to do with the abundance of love that has been freely given to me and from which I freely want to give.

Let us pray:

Lord our God, in our sin we have avoided your call.

Our love for you is like the mist,
disappearing in the heat of the sun.

Have mercy on us.

Bind up our wounds
and bring us to the foot of the cross,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Silence

Hymn 806 - *There's a wideness in God's mercy*



Luke 23:43 – Then (one of the criminals) said ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ (Jesus) replied ‘Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Jesus began his ministry with a proclamation from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – claiming he would bring ‘good news to the poor’ and ‘release to the captives’. As his ministry nears its painful end, he offers a seemingly worthless character the assurance of God’s blessing. Both the cross itself and these interactions raise many questions about the nature of God.

One of the best known chaplains from the First World War was Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, or ‘Woodbine Willie’. In one of his earliest post-war works, he recounted his response to an officer who enquired as to the nature of God:

‘What is God like?’When the question was put to me in hospital I pointed to a crucifix which hung over the officer’s bed, and said, ‘Yes, I think I can tell you. God is like that.

The officer was far from satisfied by the response, for his mind had been set on the popular image of an almighty potentate or warrior God and not the man on the cross, broken in body and spirit. That image of the suffering God became the leitmotif of Studdert Kennedy’s work and an inspiration for a later generation of theologians.

After the war, Studdert Kennedy occasionally ministered at St Martin-in-the Fields, where another former chaplain, Dick Sheppard, was the rector. He probably had his friend Studdert Kennedy’s experience in mind when he wrote this reflection on the crucifixion scene:

‘Padre, what is God like? It is your job to know.’ was only the War-time way of putting the age-long question. In answer we point, not to a single crucifix, but to one

cross alongside of two others on which God has chosen to be nailed so that He might be actually alongside of them in the direst hour of their suffering, should He be needed. Love cannot go further than this. I know no truer picture of God than this, and none so compelling.

The thieves come as a sign that God is alongside us however wretched our lives or situations. Humankind is not saved by reaching up to the truth, but because the truth reaches down to them. Jesus had no illusions about humankind, yet he always sees them as the children of God.

We then come up against the mysterious realms of 'paradise'. At the time, paradise meant a garden. ~In that often arid land, it was certainly somewhere pleasant to imagine – far removed from the unimaginable pain and anguish of the cross. Jesus knows that we are made in God's image and our spiritual quest should be one that seeks union with him. Whatever the taunts from the crowd or the other thief, Jesus greets them as brothers and sisters. The potential of that assurance of salvation comes amongst his last words – we are free to accept or reject that gift.

Let us pray in words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

O God,
Early in the morning I cry unto you.
Help me to pray
And to think only of you.
I cannot pray alone.
In me there is darkness
But with you there is light.
I am lonely but you do not leave me.
I am feeble in heart but you do not leave me.

I am restless but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience.
Your ways are pat understanding, but
You know the way for me.

Silence

Haydn Op. 51 *Amen dico tibi: hodie mecum eris paradiso*



John 19:26–27 – When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ The he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’

While the gospels are not consistent in who was present at the crucifixion, all are agreed that there were faithful women who accompanied him. There is also a strong tradition of picturing Jesus on the cross flanked by John and Mary on each side. Two people who were probably the closest to Jesus. Here we see the human touch of personal relationships making their way on to the crucifixion scene.

John attaches much importance to Mary at the foot of the cross and Jesus entrusting her to the beloved disciple. We don’t know much about Mary from the gospels, or indeed about the first 30 years of Jesus’ life. One suspects that her life would not have been an easy one.

In bearing the Christ child, she took an enormous risk with her own life and relationships. By some accounts, she spent some time in exile from her homeland. While she must have had an essential role in Jesus' formation for ministry, there are strong suggestions that she never quite understood the nature of that ministry. Now she must be even more perplexed as he finishes up nailed to a cross – the most degrading of punishments. No doubt, she would have recalled Simeon's words when she first brought Jesus to the Temple of the sword piercing her soul.

Jesus addresses his mother and then his disciple. One is left to wonder whether John is implying more than this being a son attending to the care of his mother. Legend certainly suggests that John did care for Mary in Jerusalem, and refused to leave the city while she was still alive. Catholics tend to see this interaction as a symbol of Mary becoming Mother of the Church. The more Protestant thinkers might place the emphasis on John as a symbol of the church and faithful discipleship. Some commentators suggest that in John's gospel, Mary represents the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which is now in the process of being handed over to the beloved disciple John.

From the agony of the cross, Jesus does not neglect his nearest. As the earthly phase of those relationships comes to an end, it is through discipleship that a new family of God is being created. Ministry moves from one example of servanthood to another, as former Archbishop, Donald Coggan reflects:

Mary saw, with a God-given clarity, at the moment of her greatest crisis, that servanthood lies at the very centre of the meaning of life as God intends it to be lived. Servanthood, obedience, in the great crises of life and in the little decisions of everyday, Mary saw as things of first importance. And so she doubtless taught the little boy on her lap, at her knee, through all his formative years. What greater prayer could she offer for her son that he might grow up to be a servant of the Lord –

possibly (did she glimpse it as she pondered on these things in her heart?) he might be *the* servant of the Lord.

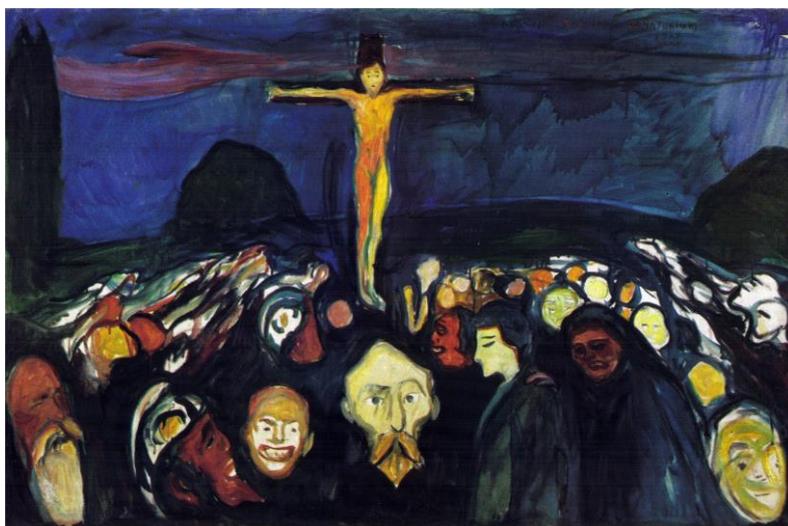
Let us pray:

God we thank you
that you made yourself known
to someone without power, wealth or status;
and we praise you
for the courage of Mary,
this young woman from Galilee,
whose Yes to the shame and shock
of bearing your Son
let loose the unstoppable power of love
which changed the world.

Amen.

Silence

Hymn 177 – *At the cross her station keeping*



Matthew 27:46 & Mark 15:34 – At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi (Ell-oh-ee), Eloi, lema sabachthani (Sa-bakh-thah-ni)? Which means, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus' cry from Psalm 22 reveals the depth of his suffering – the anguish and sense of abandonment. His appeal reflects the psalmist's lament of a righteous but suffering person who calls out for divine vindication:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest

It is the same cry that came from Job and has echoed down the centuries. Why has God allowed this to happen to me? Surely, there have been times in all of our lives when we have felt neglected by God? Our relationship with God can be perplexing, times of despair when his love seems far from us. From the cross, Jesus seems to affirm our right to challenge and not just accept the platitudes handed down to us. Jesus Christ could never have been fully human if he failed to share such sentiments.

Many Good Friday's ago, at this point in the proceedings, the conductor rather loudly proclaimed that at this point the wrath of God, that had been building up since Adam, was vented upon his Son. It is not a perspective that I can readily identify with. Over the centuries, theologians have come up with all sorts of formulations, usually drawing on some cultural or legalistic scheme of things, which fail to express how reconciliation came through the cross. The framework for me looks to seeds sown in the 12th century by Peter Abelard, that it was on the cross that the true nature of God was revealed – the God of love who fully shares in the suffering of humanity.

In his humanity, Jesus voluntarily took the cross upon his shoulders and suffered the same physical and emotional traumas, as would any human being. Broken on the cross, Jesus revealed the depth of God's love for us.

Charles Raven was another chaplain from the First World War – probably one of the greatest theological minds of his generation, but rather too radical to ascend the Church hierarchy. By the 1930's he had become a convinced pacifist and with Dick Sheppard became a founder member of the Peace Pledge Union. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he became a rather isolated figure. That struggle comes across in his writing about the cross:

He does not fight, and he does not flee. He refuses to counter the threat by armed resistance – a perfectly practicable possibility at one time in His ministry, with the country seething with resentment against Rome, with the whole Pharasaic party ready to back Him, with the Zealot movement already gathering strength for its desperate outbreak a generation later. He could have brought the issue to the test of armed rebellion; He refused to do so. Even in Gethsemane He refused to pray for the help of ten legions of angels; He refused to believe that God's cause could be advanced even by spiritual warfare, if by warfare is meant the violent coercion of those who, for all their blindness and guilt are still children of God. And he did not flee. Right up to the last moment it would have been possible for Him to evade the issue or postpone it; to have withdrawn into the comparative safety of Galilee and continued His itinerant ministry to the people of the villages. He could have yielded to the desire that the cup should pass. He could have maintained His presence with His disciples; His task of going about doing good; His proclaiming of the Word. But he did not. In the way that He chose, the world discovered what it had been searching for ever since man became conscious of himself and his need – discovered a means

of overcoming evil, discovered the conquest of sin. The way that He chose is the instrument of salvation.

Let us pray:

Lord, at the moment you do not seem real to me.

My prayers are lifeless and my spirit feels numb.

Help me to persevere when faith seems absent,
in the certainty that you are with me in the darkness,
and your light is at the end of the tunnel.

Renew my bruised spirit with your love,
and help me to rest in you. In the name of Jesus, my Saviour.

Amen.

Silence

Haydn Op. 51 – *Eli, Eli, lama asabthani?*



John 19:28 – After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture). ‘I am thirsty.’

We can but speculate on the many pains that must accompany death by crucifixion. Thirst is probably one of the lesser ones. When Jesus thirsts, all that he is offered is sour wine with echoes of the cup he so readily accepted from the Father. Looking back in John's gospel, Jesus' ministry begins at the wedding in Cana, where he offers the people the finest of wine. Now, at the end of his life, he is repaid with sour wine.

Jesus suffered the agonies of physical pain and was not ashamed to call upon someone to alleviate his suffering. His lesson is, not how to die, but how to live in a way where death becomes the gate that opens into a fuller life. When he suffered, he did not pray for miraculous deliverance but simply sought a solution to one of the lesser pains. Here is one that walks through into glory. The pain of his passage becomes the setting for his triumph.

One might conceive that this last request was creating an opportunity for one of those involved in his tortuous end to make a charitable gesture. So often, it is these small gestures that reveal what is going on in the hearts of people. It's hard to imagine that they all stood there with hardened hearts enjoying such an awful spectacle. Wherever in the world today we hear such cries, whether it is on our streets or across the airwaves, Christ must long to see us fulfilling that request. We as individuals and as the body representing Christ must always be open to hear those cries.

With so much emphasis on individual freedom and fulfilment in society today, it is easy to lose sight of our corporate responsibilities. In the 1980's, another of our Archbishops, Robert Runcie, often found himself at odds with the politicians on these sorts of issues. He had this to say:

What is wrong with individual autonomy? Don't we all want to be free, to be responsible for our actions, to determine things for ourselves? A Christian can say at best to this, 'up to a point'. For, though we have free will, we are not free agents. We are accountable – to God and to each other. Christianity is a corporate religion,

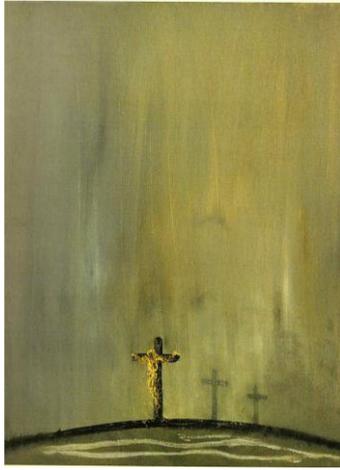
rooted in life within a community and our Christian character is revealed in our love of justice and love of others. The autonomous individual is on his or her own. We are not. We live by the grace of God, and in God we live, move and have our being. So a Christian is always likely to challenge a prevailing spirit of individual autonomy. It is a spurious freedom which neglects the demands of God.

How Jesus must long to see a few more people step out from the crowd in answer to the cries from a suffering world. Let us pray:

O God, whose Son Jesus Christ cared for the welfare of everyone
and went about doing good;
grant us the imagination and perseverance to create in this country
and throughout the world
a just and loving society for the human family;
and make us agents of your compassion
to the suffering, the persecuted and the oppressed,
through the Spirit of your Son,
who shared the suffering of humankind,
our pattern and our redeemer, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Silence

Hymn 147 – *My song is love unknown*



John 19:30 – When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’

Jesus’ expression of completion comes with confidence. The cross has come as a final revelation of God’s love. The poignancy of the moment is conveyed by the simple notation that followed ‘Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.’ The wounded healer’s work is done. God’s plan of reconciliation has been fulfilled in Jesus’ mission. The truth of God has been revealed in an often hostile world. Everything that could be done has been done. The world had been offered a sight of God as he or she really is. After Easter, we can look back and see this as an affirmation that love is stronger than hate, grace than sin, life than death. For those of us who believe that through Jesus’ life, ministry and passion we have seen God, the cross can become the most precious emblem of our dearest hopes.

But the mission of God in this world is far from completed. There is no need for me to provide a catalogue of current human tragedies. Jesus has set us free and we must now play our part in continuing his work. If we are to model ourselves on his example, our task is to come alongside people and care for the creation that came into being through him. Taking up his cross does not come without risks. There will be times when it involves sharing in his pain. In the words of Jean Vanier:

This horrifying story of violence, hatred and cruelty ends with an immense ray of hope: death does not have the last word! Violence and hate have been transformed

into tenderness and forgiveness through the power of God, the Word of God made flesh. Waters of life begin to flow. People will now be able to receive these waters of love and communion and find inner liberation. As disciples they will become a source of peace for our divided, broken world. But this gift of the Spirit is not given without pain. The pain and death of Jesus, freely accepted, are followed by the pain and death that his disciples willingly accept. Just as life flowed from the pierced heart of Jesus, life will flow from the pierced hearts of those who will suffer in the name of Jesus. Disciples of Jesus throughout the ages suffer rejection, are mocked, laughed at, pushed aside, sometimes tortured and killed for their faith, for truth and justice. They become like Jesus.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we thank you for all who over the centuries have followed the way of the cross through being faithful to the gospel in the face of martyrdom. We pray for Christians who face persecution today; for all who are unable to practice their faith freely. Keep your church mindful of where its true treasure lies. Inspire us to lively hope through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Silence

Haydn Op. 51 – *Consummatum est*



Luke 23:46 – Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’

Just before the darkness of death settles down, Jesus commends himself to the Father with words from Psalm 31:

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.
You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name’s sake guide me,
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord,

faithful God.

In Luke, there is no cry of abandonment. Jesus' end seems to come rather more peacefully. Once again, his words become the model for later Christian martyrs. At the end of the day, the cross is not an isolated incident in history that leaves us weeping. Nor is it something to view from a distance as battle well fought. For the cross comes as a revelation of what God is really like. These words from the cross have confronted us with the wonder and poignancy of the incarnation. Jesus is the Son of God who saves the world by revealing God's love. Only through sharing our humanity can God unveil the fullness of his love and that extends to an eternal refuge. After the journey in life that Jesus Christ shared with us, we now seek the divine union that was revealed in his resurrection.

On the last Sunday before Advent, the German Lutheran Church celebrates 'Sunday of the Dead', rather like our 'All Souls' commemoration. On that day in 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who later suffered martyrdom, was preaching in London. It was a time when he was already at odds with the Nazi regime for interfering with the Church's teaching:

And now the God of peace and eternal life gives it to the church today. It is meant for those who believe in God: Who promises it to his people and gives them utmost assurance: they are with me, they are in peace. God's world is peace, final peace after the battle; God's peace means rest for those whom life has made tired; it means security for those who wandered through this life unsheltered and unguarded; a home for the homeless. It means quietness for the battle weary, relief for the tormented, comfort for the distressed and those who weep. God's peace is like a mother tenderly stroking her child's forehead. I want to comfort you just as a mother comforts her child. Your dead are comforted with God's comfort. God has wiped away their tears. God has put an end to the ceaseless hustle and bustle of this life. They are in peace.

That peace of God passes all understanding. Let us pray:

O Christ, your cross speaks both to us and to our world. In your dying for us you accepted the pain and hurt of the whole creation. The arms of your cross stretch out across the broken world in reconciliation. You have made peace with us. Help us to make peace with you by sharing in your reconciling work. **Amen.**

Silence

Hymn 151 – *Sing, my tongue the glorious battle*

Fr. Clive Woodward
Curate, St. Mary's Willingdon
revd.clive@hotmail.com