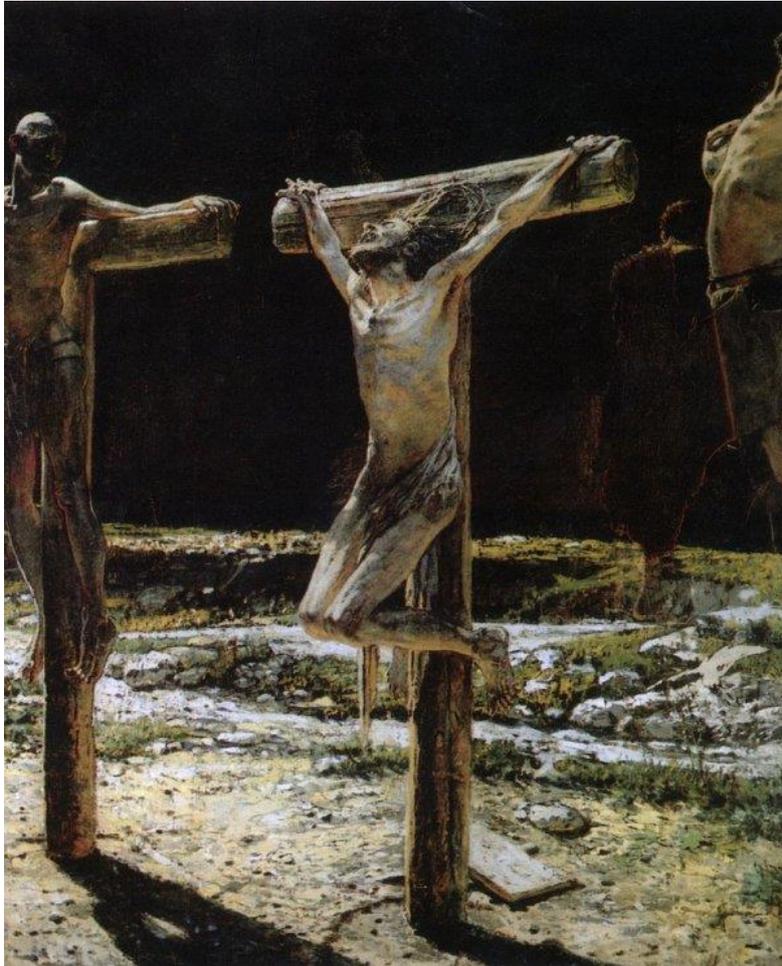


Holy Week 2021 Good Friday
Address given by The Reverend John Summers
Chaplain at Trinity College, Cambridge

Reflections and Prayers



*Crucifixion, Nikolai Ge
(1831 – 1894)*

1. Betrayal: Matthew 26.69-75

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' And he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.'

Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

We gather this afternoon at the foot of the cross and begin that annual task of piecing together what on earth is going on. We meditate upon the working out of God's redemptive plan, its mysteries, its pain and its provocations, but we turn inwards as well, trying to find locate ourselves in what is unfolding, now and then.

Christ is stripped bare on the cross. The altar is stripped bare. And I suggest that we approach this service as a time to strip our innermost selves bare and to offer what we find, in all its confusion and discomfort, to God. This is a service with plenty of silence. Many people find silence incredibly hard to deal with. For some it highlights loneliness, for many it leaves a space in which difficult memories or inclinations are prone to bubble to the surface of our consciousness. For others it is, instinctively, time wasted.

The word 'Passion' has its root in the Latin *pati*: to suffer. There are two senses of suffering: the sense of the feeling of pain, but also the sense of allowing something to happen to you (thus we have the phrase 'he doesn't suffer fools gladly'). Christ in his Passion knows both senses of the word. He knows the physical pain of the cross and its scandal, but at the same time he suffers because he allows his crucifixion to happen to him.

In this service, we must allow the silence to happen to us, even if it opens up a place of pain. Because as we meditate on Christ's passion we can know that holding fear and vulnerability together is something with which God is most intimately acquainted. He is not a stranger to it and he walks with us as we abide in it.

Peter would not allow things to happen to him. Despite his protestations of loyalty unto death the night before, he denies Christ three times. He fought events, he refused simply to listen to Jesus and wanted to correct him. He wanted to change the story. His attempts to inject the noise of speech lead him to a place of silence where he is totally broken down, weeping in the garden, in denial of his friend and in denial of himself. His lowest ebb, though, is the point at which the tide begins to turn. That painful place of openness to his soul is the place from which he can begin to rebuild, to approach the risen Christ and eventually to proclaim his Kingdom.

In this silence today, we offer ourselves in every aspect of our vulnerability to Christ on the cross. We join in his silence, we offer our painful sensations, our doubts and confusions and we sit, hands open, ready to hear God. We must allow this silence to happen to us, not trying as Peter did to fill it with comfortable words, but accepting it as the way that God speaks to us this afternoon.

Heavenly Father, as we meditate on Christ's passion this afternoon, we pray that we will remain mindful of the pain which we cause others through our choices. We pray for forgiveness, and express our wonder that in the face of our sinful decisions the response of your Son, Our Lord, was one of pure love and sacrifice.

Amen.

2. Judgment: Mark 15.1-15

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realised that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

There's an anonymous saying, "Those who follow the crowd usually get lost in it." I might be unusual in doing so, but I often feel that the Pilate who emerges from the Passion stories is not so much an arch villain as just another person brought to devastating self emptiness by his denial of the truth in the face of his vulnerability.

Pilate, full of doubt about Jesus' guilt, indeed fully appreciating the bad faith of his accusers, condemns Christ to death because of his wish to satisfy the crowd. Elsewhere we are told that Pilate literally washes his hands of his judgment, and with that he moves into silence in the Passion story. Whereas Peter's courtyard devastation is a platform for rebuilding, Pilate's abnegation remains forever ambiguous. Will he join with the centurion later on in acclaiming Christ on the cross, or will he continue to prefer the security of the mob to having to face his inner self against the light of truth?

Where do we place ourselves in this sorry story? Many of us would accept that we make decisions which are faithful not to our sense of reason but to our concern about how they will be received by other people. We play to the crowd. We turn our backs on those who are unacceptable or irrelevant to mainstream social preoccupations: the convict, the addict, the mentally ill, our political opponents.

Often we do that at moments which stand out with particular clarity. We deny sympathy for a person if we feel it would embarrass us. We turn away from a persistent beggar in the street, worrying about the social awkwardness caused by the encounter, not where the beggar will find the next meal or what enduring calamity led them to the streets. By trying to fit in with the crowd we make such choices as unthinkingly as we breathe.

The challenge of the story of Pilate is not only to consider how we would have exercised Pilate's judgment, but how we would have exerted pressure on him as part of the crowd. We cannot, in other words, criticise crowds without recalling that we are routinely and unthinkingly part of them.

Would we have chosen easy identity with the consensus of the mob, or would we have elected to stand aside and insist on something better?

God speaks to us this afternoon not as members of a crowd but in the openness and solitude of our silence. He calls us as named individuals. How do we respond?

*Heavenly Father, Jesus was condemned to death to satisfy the anger of a mob. Help us not only to have the strength to stand up for those who are held in contempt or derision by the mainstream. But through your mercy may we also have the courage to identify ourselves, and act, independently, just as you know us, and love us, as individuals. **Amen.***

3. Friendship: Luke 23.26-27

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.

Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus says that those who wish to come after him must take up their cross and follow him. This is lived out nowhere so literally as in the person of Simon of Cyrene. We know next to nothing of him, and cannot even say whether he took up the cross willingly. But take it up, and follow after Jesus, he did.

It has been said that the only way to have a friend is to be one. Friendship will not always involve the comfortable interaction of people on easy, familiar terms. Friendship born of the love which Christ commands of us takes shape even in situations of anonymity, hostility, chance, and crisis. Indeed, perhaps it only authentically takes place where it does so against all the odds.

Simon had no idea he would be asked to take up the cross, and perhaps no choice. But he accepted his fate, living it out with honesty, faithfulness and integrity. His reaction on that first Good Friday stands in contrast to those of Peter and Pilate. For Simon moves out of the crowd - unwillingly, for we are told he is seized. But the movement from anonymity into intimate union with Jesus is clear. From it comes liberation and true identity.

For though we know next to nothing of Simon, as I said, in a biographical sense, we do know this: that he answered the call and that he shared a burden. He loved his neighbour - the man who was passing in that fateful moment - though he presumably knew him not and had no part in his past or his condemnation. Jesus said that we would know his disciples as those who loved one another. So we know all that we need to know about this disciple Simon of Cyrene. Whereas Peter and Pilate end up stripped to nothing, Simon leaves the story in abundant fullness of life.

We can say the same of St Veronica, who in extra biblical traditions took pity on Christ as he passed by to Golgotha and gave him her veil to mop his brow, leaving his face miraculously imprinted on the veil but, we may also say, his discipleship marked on her heart.

Which crosses are we being asked to bear? Who is asking us? Are we missing these moments? Or are we already shouldering the cross for a friend? For someone we love? Who do we think of as our neighbours? In our silence, let us hear God speak to us about not only who we are but also who he has put alongside us, and how he calls us into relationship with himself, through them.

Heavenly Father, at his last supper with his friends Christ commanded us to love one another. May we honour that commission in the most difficult times, which are presented unexpectedly and in the face of great stress. We pray for honesty, faithfulness and integrity. Above all we pray that we might offer friendship as generously as Christ offers it to us. Amen.

4. Suffering: Mark 15.25-32

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way, the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

In her diary, the author Katherine Mansfield warned that we must not *submit* to suffering. Rather, we should *accept* and *absorb* it. Because by making it part of our lives, we might transform it into love.

Here we see Jesus at the lowest ebb. The physical pain of the nails and the tightness of chest, the heat of the sun and the parched mouth, but perhaps more distressing than all of this, the mocking, the derision, the taunting of the people around him. Yet Christ remains silent amidst it all. What are we to make of that silence?

There are various moments in the gospels when activity on earth seems to come into such close relation with the activity of God that a startling resonating effect is produced. I think particularly of the transfiguration, when the shining Jesus speaks of proximity to his father atop the mountain, the glory of that union too magnificent to do anything but glimpse. Another moment might be the voice of God heard as Christ emerges from the Jordan at his baptism. At these times Jesus draws deeply on the Father and radiates their glory.

But here, on the cross, God seems a long way away. What is immediate is the hatred and contempt of the worst of humanity. Jesus' silence is found in that context. It is not a passive silence, for Jesus

on the cross is always active in his relationship with his father. What the bystanders throw at Jesus they throw at God and it is received by him. But the reception is a processing of it: an acceptance of the worst we can offer that it might be mediated into the love of Christ. That acceptance requires no speech but patience - that word again.

RS Thomas captured something of this active patience in his poem *The Musician*:

*A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed*

*On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin,
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.*

*I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.*

*So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.*

*Heavenly Father, give us the strength, we pray, to take suffering into our lives as Christ endured all suffering in his passion. By your grace may it be transformed in us, as it was in him, into endless love for each other and for you. **Amen.***

5. Paradise: Luke 23.39-43

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding Jesus and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

What does it mean to be saved? Can we feel it here? What is paradise? Is it somewhere, or anywhere or nowhere? How can we know whether what we do is pleasing in the eyes of God? Wars have been fought over questions such as these. Many have claimed to have the

answer, to be assured of their personal preferment. But who can speak confidently into these mysteries?

The repentant thief, crucified next to Jesus on the cross, has come to be known in some Catholic traditions as Dismas, though he is not named in the gospel. We know nothing of the details of his crimes, or his biography. He is an obscure character who makes a fleeting appearance in the gospel and everything about him, save his prayer to Christ, seems wretched.

If we look at the crucifixion painting by Nikolai Ge on your order of service, we might wonder if he is the shadowy figure on Christ's right, speaking to him, or whether he is the anguished soul on the other side, his face hidden as he screams up to heaven. Some traditions place the penitent thief on Christ's right. Either way, the thief is nothing but obscure.

Yet this thief is the only person who, in the text of the New Testament, is assured of his place in paradise. Ponder that for a moment. None of the biggest names of the church enjoy that accolade: Peter, Paul, John, even Mary. Rather, it is the gnarled, unclean, desperate criminal, nailed to a cross with his life ebbing away, he who sees, testifies and believes. His trust is rewarded with nothing less than eternal fellowship with God. Here, in the pit of despair, at the apogee of grief, in the fires of the hell of the cross, is grace triumphant.

Heavenly Father, as the repentant thief prayed to you in the hour of your death, so we pray to you in the midst of your passion, that you might hear the requests of all those in situations of utter despair. In the prisons of debt and addiction, in the red hot flames of warzones, in the silent, lonely pain of illness, we pray that all will know your loving presence. Amen.

6. It is finished: John 19.25b-30

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

How can the life of one who is to rise again come to an end on the cross? 'It is finished' is a translation of the Greek verb form *tetelestai* (τετέλεσται). In the English translation there is a sense of finality. But verbs in New Testament Greek in the perfect tense, as with *tetelestai*, have a special significance: they always speak of an event completed in the past but which has continuing effect into the future.

For John, the finishing of Christ's earthly, bodily life, is in a sense the start of its eternal significance. A life has not been ended. But instead an enduring prophecy, a promise for all time, a gift of grace for all, have come to fulfilment. This is the coming to fulfilment of Christ's whole life: his incarnate witness, his teaching, his sacrifice of himself. All has now been given: it is finished. But unlike a casual gift, given today and consumed or forgotten tomorrow, this gift is beyond time. It is the gift that draws us out of the confines of this world into joyful communion with God - into what John calls eternal life throughout his gospel: the drawing out begins on Good Friday and will have its fulfilment on the third day. Christ leaves his earthly body, and invites us to do the same. Paul says in Galatians that he was crucified with Christ. So too, we are crucified with Christ, in order that we might come to life in fleshly our bodies through him. This moment of death is not just a moment in Christ's story but in ours as well.

We cannot but despair on Good Friday. Jesus endures pain and death for nothing that he did. The accusations levelled against him apply to us, not to Jesus. But there remains, even in the darkness of the final moment on the cross, a light which cannot be put out. This is the light of John's Prologue: the light which shines in the darkness and which the darkness cannot comprehend or extinguish. It is finished: it is fulfilled.

*Heavenly Father, we pray into the darkness of the cross. We join those who stand by this scene of death with fear and trembling in our hearts. We see the body of our Saviour broken on the rough wood, and we hang our heads. Yet in this black scene we acknowledge the light which shines in the darkness and which cannot be extinguished. We wait in its silent presence for the new light which will dawn on Easter Day. We pray with St Paul: Maranatha – Come Lord, Come! **Amen.***