

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

Introduction

Most of us tend to try to hide our problems. The bits of us we don't like very much, or are ashamed of, or think are unattractive. The self we prefer to show to the world is one of strength, beauty, success, wealth, humour – whatever it is that we think will convince the world of how impressive, how desirable, and how employable we are.

It is, perhaps, for that reason that for the first few centuries, the early Christians chose not to depict the image of the crucifixion in their art. Worried, most likely, that showing the world that their saviour died by a method so shameful that it couldn't even be talked about in polite Roman society, would only attract scorn at best, and persecution at worst.

It's no surprise, then, that the very earliest image we have of the crucifixion is not the devotional image of a pious Christian, but a piece of graffiti, scrawled on a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome, where a picture of a worshipper approaching a donkey-headed Christ is accompanied by a mocking text in crude characters that reads: "Alexamenos worships his God." For that ancient anti-Christian artist of perhaps 200AD, the cross is the best evidence there could possibly be that the Christian faith is, quite literally, laughable.

But that history of scorn, that early recognition that there was something dangerous and potentially self-undermining about the presentation of the Cross, is what for me only makes what happens next more compelling.

For, far from being hidden away as an inconvenient wrinkle in the Christian story, or being in some way covered up or denied, or theologised out of significance, the Cross soon became not only depicted but thrust front and centre into the heart of Christian devotion. Until today, we are confronted with the Cross at the centre-point of the Church's altar, at the top of the Church's steeple, on the cover of every prayerbook, on the end of so many million silver necklaces, and of course as one of the most common subjects of Western Classical Art.

Rather than being hidden away, the Cross has been brought into the centre of things – and yet when we face up to it we still are being confronted with a problem. For while the shame of suffering associated with Rome may have softened, the image of the Cross still represents deep paradoxes and unanswered questions.

How can it be that the such great suffering can be inflicted on a sinless one? On someone of whom the Scriptures tell us it could never be said in any way *he deserved it*? How could a loving God allow that – or indeed any such suffering? And how can we place in our holiest places an image of such divine

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

abandonment – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” How can it be that the space we reverence as being close to God is decorated with an image of such profound Godforsakenness?

Contrary to our own instincts, perhaps – as Christians we choose not to hide from these problems of our faith, but as people determined to be confronted by the Cross, we choose to have them constantly placed quite literally before our eyes. To be challenged by them, and, I believe, to have our hearts constantly enlarged by our meditations upon them.

For the problem that the Cross presents to us is not just a dry theological one. It’s not just a visual demonstration of some trite problem set on the A-Level Religious Studies syllabus, but something much more profoundly urgent.

For as we gaze upon the Cross we see, not hidden from our sight, but rather revealed with a brutal clarity, the profound nature and challenges of our own human reality. For Christ’s sufferings are not a distant historical fact, or a spectacle upon which we can look unmoved, but rather they reveal, and express, and bring to a focus for us the pain of our own human experience, even as they show for us how that experience can be transformed, and healed, and saved, and redeemed.

And to such a great and unspeakable mystery – as we gaze upon him and know ourselves in him, and see in him the very heart of ourselves, and know himself in us – perhaps the only proper response is silence. Or perhaps that kind of spoken and sung form of silence that is our liturgical worship. And so, in two hours’ time we shall be brought before him in the most direct way to do just that. To stand before and receive for ourselves the Cross in all its majesty and mystery.

But in these two hours, to prepare our hearts for this moment of encounter, I invite you to join me in sharing the Journey of Jesus towards that Cross. To travel with Jesus in the last steps of his earthly life, and to contemplate with me the way in which this, his last earthly journey, sheds light upon and opens up for us the intertwinings of the mystery of the cross and the mystery of human life, that our hearts may be enlarged to encounter him in his Passion and in his Glory, in this series of addresses on “The Cross: The Tree of Life”.

HYMN: Glory be to Jesus, who in bitter pains

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

1 – Betrayal

Almighty Father,
look with mercy on this your family
for which our Lord Jesus Christ was content to be betrayed
and given up into the hands of sinners
and to suffer death upon the cross;
who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

The Collect for Good Friday, which we have just prayed together is always one that sticks in my mind. I think part of this is because of the reference – all of a sudden – in the midst of the loneliness and isolation we often feel this day – to us as “God’s family”. As if, in the midst of the trauma of Good Friday, it is specially important for us to experience our solidarity with one another and know we are not alone.

But perhaps the stronger reason is that gentle-sounding but thought-provoking statement, that “Our Lord Jesus Christ was *content to be betrayed*.”

“Content to be betrayed”: A shocking juxtaposition for most of us, since surely there are few less palatable emotions than betrayal. There is little else so damaging to our contentment. For while suffering, pain, opposition, enmity are all trials, of it all there is nothing so bitter as the betrayal of one we thought our friend.

“Content to be betrayed” – sounds almost self-contradictory. And yet the early stages of Jesus’ knowing and measured and deliberate journey towards the Cross are thick with betrayal. Indeed, it’s hard to select a reading that really does justice to the prevalence and importance of betrayal in this moment without reading a whole chapter aloud. For at each break in the action there is betrayal of one sort or another.

First we hear of Judas’ decision to betray Jesus, then the narrative of the last Supper, then as they leave the Supper Jesus tells them that “you will all become deserters”, betrayers, and then Peter is told he will deny Christ three times, then we hear of Gethsemane, and then Judas bursts in again with the armed crowd, the fruit of his betrayal, the disciples – as predicted – flee, betraying their master. Then we hear of Jesus before the High Priest, and then again we return to the theme of betrayal, as Peter denies his Lord three times.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

And these two overlapping and reflecting betrayals – that of Judas and that of Peter – remind us of the complexity and dark variety of betrayal. That it is not just the action of people corrupted by money or external incentives, but it is also so often, and perhaps even more painfully, simply a weakness of will or a lack of courage.

Indeed, for me the most painful moment is dramatized in Luke's Gospel, not in the betrayal of Judas but of Peter, when uniquely of the Gospel writers Luke adds a small human detail.

At Peter's third denial, the cock crows, and then – this is the unique bit – *"The Lord turned and looked at Peter."* Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."

This final look of Jesus, this catching of the eye, this last glimpse of his face. It is hard to reconstruct in physical terms how the two of them might have been placed to make this possible. But in imaginative human terms Luke seems to depict that moment when, so often, as we betray our friends and those whom we love, in the moment we do it their face comes again before our mind's eye, looking at us, and our stomach sinks, and the earth seems to drop vertiginously away.

Not, because, like Judas, we sell them out for money or anything like that most of the time, but because like Peter we don't have the confidence to take the tough route of integrity, and the risk it poses to ourselves. We let them down just to get something we enjoy ourselves, or to cosy up to others, or to join in the laughter behind their backs, or to parade our loyalty to some popular cause. And then, like Jesus, we see them looking at us.

It's not a comfortable thing to talk about – betrayal – it's not even a comfortable thing to think about. It's something we prefer to trap, capture, and lock away in some deep cabinet of forgetfulness in our soul. And yet it is something that the Cross – in all its revelatory power – draws into the open today, calling us not only to reflect on betrayal, but also on why, for the other 364 days of the year, it's something we'd prefer not to think about.

Because when we start opening up these reflections we begin to realise, I believe, something quite unexpected.

At first we think we don't want to contemplate betrayal because of our guilt about betraying others. Those moments we can all remember when we have let down those we love. The bitterness and the emotional shame that seems to endure even long after forgiveness has happened, whenever we call to mind and touch and handle these broken memories.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

But I suspect the deeper reason we struggle to think about betrayal is our anxiety that somehow deep down we know that we must risk being betrayed ourselves if we are not to end up completely alone.

If, as the Psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes was, I think, the first to say, *Grief is the price we pay for love*, then betrayal is the name of the risk we take when we love someone else. That they might leave us, or let us down, or simply disappear – and whether it's their fault or not, it often feels much the same. For who can know the secrets of another's heart? So then, the more we love, the more we trust, the more – sadly – we risk being betrayed.

And our worries about human betrayal only become more acute when we move into the religious sphere. For while we are aware, and can perhaps accept, that we betray God again and again. A small but urgent whisper within us, that perhaps we need to acknowledge on Good Friday of all days, also worries that – in the end – maybe God might betray us.

Betray us by not answering our prayers, betray us by not rescuing us from our failures, betray us by not making our Church grow when we've poured all our time and energy and creativity into ministering there, betray us by not putting a stop to horrendous suffering, and *at its very deepest* after a life lived in devotion, betray us by simply not existing at all. The ultimate betrayal.

It's hard to allow ourselves to even be honest that we think that sometimes, and yet it seems to me that this dark fear is also held up for us to see in the Scriptures at the start of that story of the journey to Emmaus, at the moment when we hear of the impact of the events of Good Friday on Jesus' closest disciples: They stand still, they look sad, and they tell the story of Jesus' death, saying 'but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'

For me that sentence is the very lowest moment, the deepest depth, the absolute zero of the emotional arc of the whole Jesus narrative. Looking at the Cross the disciples not only feel sad, not only feel confused, not only feel angry – they feel betrayed. Look at what we risked for him! Look at how we hoped in him! How could he let us down like this?

And yet this moment is the very moment that also reveals the hidden hope that lies in betrayal. That while betrayal is the risk we take for relationship, relationship is the only way betrayal can be healed.

For if we try and deal with our betrayal of others or their betrayal of us entirely on our own, we may risk the outcome of despair – see Judas. Yet the searing pain of returning to the one we betray – or who has betrayed us, can sometimes be the one thing that can bring healing and transformation.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

We see this in that most intense and sensitive of encounters between Jesus and Peter in John Chapter 21. Where Jesus, with the triple insistence of his question, 'do you love me', makes Peter relive his own three-fold betrayal. And yet their shared, pained thinking over of this breach of trust brings about the deepest possible new relationship, in which Jesus dares to trust his betrayer Peter with his greatest treasure, his whole flock of followers – "feed my sheep."

And we see it too on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus, in a sense, has to explain himself to his disciples, to explain why what they thought he had promised them had not been fulfilled, to help them to reunderstand what had happened, to help them to move on from their own sense of betrayal.

And just as at the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus forgives the betrayal of Peter, so in a sense – and I'm speaking very metaphorically here – the disciples on the road to Emmaus need emotionally to forgive Jesus. Forgive him for not being who they thought he was, and allow him to be who he really is, even with all the pain and disappointment that has caused them.

And that, it seems to me, is something that this Good Friday calls us to as well. Not only to ask for God's forgiveness of the many ways in which we betray his love. But also, in some metaphorical sense, on this day of all days, to emotionally forgive God for not being who we thought him to be or even desperately wanted him to be.

To forgive the pile of unanswered prayers, the loss of loved ones, the pain and the heartbreak, the whole mess and suffering business of this world. Because it's only through that process of letting go, that we come to know not *the God as we might like him to be* of wish-fulfilment and general uplift, but the God as he really is of infinite mystery and majesty.

And so, in a paradoxical way, Jesus is perhaps content to be betrayed, because betrayal and forgiveness, breaking and healing, is so often part of how we grow in understanding, and more important than that, how we grow in love.

We grow in love of another person, in love of God, not because they never ever fail to meet our personal expectations of them, or because they never do anything that surprises or even disappoints us. Rather it so often when things go wrong, when our expectations are betrayed, or when we betray their expectations of us, that we are truly confronted with the reality of the other – a reality that, (when we can forgive it, and if it can be healed), may bring about a relationship of greater depth and truth, and even of greater love and trust.

So, in the breaking and the healing of our expectations of God that happens for us on this Good Friday, just as it once did for the disciples on the Emmaus road, may our downcast faces may become

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

burning hearts. As through disappointment, and betrayal, and forgiveness, we move to a renewed and stronger relationship with our Creator.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

2 – Uncertainty

One of the questions that I find myself confronted with almost on a daily basis in my current work at University, is “what is the purpose of Higher Education?” There are all sorts of answers put forwards of course – to increase knowledge, to improve employability, to achieve advances in healthcare or quality of life, and many others – but for me, and I think especially in pastoral ministry, it seems that one of our aims at least ought to be to expand the capacity to live with uncertainty.

For so many students, University is the first time they have really had to deal in a serious way with the choices of life, and the flip side of that, the uncertainties they cause. Until 18 life proceeds along fairly stable railway tracks, that lead from one year to the next, until at 21, the endless choices of life seem to be dizzying. This isn’t just about career decisions, it’s about uncertainties about future family life, and values, and geography, the gnawing question of success and failure, and the prospect of danger, illness and threat – everything seems up for grabs.

And as we talk about it together, one thing I often find myself saying is that while it’s certainly true that some things in life settle down as we get older, what really changes is not that we are more certain about what lies ahead, but that we get better at holding and living with uncertainty, better at *not knowing* what the next day will bring.

But none of that growth and maturity takes away uncertainty’s agonising edge. And so it’s right that Christians over the centuries have called Jesus’ experience in Gethsemane the *Agony* in the Garden.

For this moment in the journey to the Cross is not perhaps the simple allegory of obedience and temptation that is its standard interpretation. It’s not just about a moral message to do what God tells us, not what we want. But rather it opens up for us a moment of genuine uncertainty, the pain of the unknown within the story of Jesus, in which we see revealed, and perhaps transformed, the uncertainties and perplexities of our own lives.

In Luke’s Gospel, alert as ever to human psychology, we hear a striking detail. The disciples, we are told, fall asleep not, as we might have assumed, because of tiredness, but Luke says – “because of grief.” Sleep is the escape, for the disciples, from the pain of the moment.

Now for many of us grief and pain isn’t something that causes sleep – in fact often it takes sleep away. But in many ways frantic anxiety and fretting about small details or spinning round possibilities and solutions in our heads, the distractions of frenetic activity, or alcohol, or endless social media scrolling, or other addictions, or plunging ourselves into work or institutional life, represent for us what sleep represents for the disciples – an attempt at escape.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

An attempt to block out the contemplation of an uncertain future that is just too challenging to face head on. An escape from the agony in the garden, from the uncertainty, held open in prayer by Jesus alone. *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.*

For Jesus, the anguish of uncertainty is not something to be evaded with distractions or sleep but something to be faced. And not just faced, but held open in prayer.

For what is striking to me about this moment in the garden in Jesus' language is its conditionality. "*If you are willing*", "*if this cannot pass unless I drink it.*" And until Judas bursts on the scene, or perhaps even until the Cross itself, it seems that Jesus' "if", that conditionality, is not finally extinguished. That possibility of a different outcome, as a desire registered but declared not to be as decisive as the Father's will, is still there. So long as this "if" remains, there is no final answer to Gethsemane, no absolute certainty about what God desires, no end to the uncertainty – until the final certainty of death descends at the ninth hour.

And this Gethsemane moment, it seems to me, is vital to those of us who seek to approach the fact and challenge of uncertainty as people of faith.

I have to confess I've always struggled with those who tell me they have a crystal clear understanding of what God wants them to do at every moment of their lives. Perhaps it's just envy – I wish he would speak clearly to me like that. But I find it hard to believe that God seeks to remove uncertainty from the human condition to just such a degree as telling us exactly what to do and just what will happen, so long as we obey. For me, at least, I'm profoundly aware that what I feel God wants of me is so tightly bound up with my own thoughts and feelings that it is impossible to completely isolate it from my own psychology – indeed, over the years I've become fairly comfortable with the idea that the two can work together, not always in opposition.

So for me that continued "if" of Jesus is something I identify with powerfully. Gethsemane doesn't end, as I see it, with God telling Jesus what he wants and what will happen, and Jesus signing up to it – then there would be no "if". But it ends in a different sort of way, as Jesus allows his continuing uncertainty as man to be held within the eternal certainty of God.

Being a person of faith who believes in the providence of God, doesn't necessarily mean finding out what God wants for us and then signing up to do it and then everything is sorted. Rather, it means – for me at least – allowing our daily uncertainties and our experiments, and our successes and failures, to be held within the greater certainties of God.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

This is perhaps a more challenging way to live – it would be so much easier to be certain all the time – but it also seems to me to come to terms with the uncertain nature of life in a way which is, honest and, yes, though sometimes painful, is also freeing.

For many of us, especially when we are young, go around with the notion that there is a certain golden path through life laid ahead of us. A path that promises happiness, fulfilment, and success, and that if we take the correct (but currently unknown) decisions we will have a wonderful time. Any wrong decision, however, will plunge us off the edge of this golden path into utter ruin, despair, and misery. God, we hope, will tell us how to stay on this mysterious golden path, and not put a foot wrong.

But the reality, I think, is that for all of us, there are many good paths we can take through life. Indeed, we can take a whole range of choices – for reasons good and bad – and they can work out for us. Because amidst the uncertainty and the chaos of these decisions, underneath them all there remain the deeper certainties that we are loved, saved, held, and sustained by God, whether we decide to become a chef, or an accountant, or a teacher, whether we end up with this person or that one, and whether that life brings us success or failure or a mixture of both.

So in life, so often it seems to me, we stand like Jesus in Gethsemane, uncertain – sometimes painfully uncertain about the future. And I get great reassurance in these moments, that Jesus never says in Gethsemane: Father, I know exactly what you want, now I agree to do it. But rather he allows his uncertainty, his own desire, his awareness of his limitations as man, his “if” – if you like – to be held within the will, and the purpose, and the providence of God.

To grow up, it seems to me, is not to seek to try to remove uncertainty from our lives by somehow tapping into God’s clear instructions, but rather to somehow come to accept that all our uncertainty, our own daily successes and stumblings, our own witherings and flourishings, our own dyings and risings, are held within an eternal certainty. To allow this fragile and chance-filled life of ours to be held within the eternal arms of God. For Gethsemane suggests that strength comes not by being given secret knowledge about the fancy footwork needed to stay upon some kind of narrow tightrope through life, but rather in the faith that, as St Paul puts it, in the end, whatever decisions we might make:

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

3 – Violence

In the various Churches I've worked in over the last 15 or so years, one of the parts of the Holy Week liturgy that people have often said they find the most moving but also the most challenging is in the Palm Sunday liturgy.

In many places in the Passion Gospel the congregation is encouraged to join in with the words of the crowd. And one of the comments I hear the most is how hard people find it not only to say – but even to shout – “Crucify him!” in the words of the Passion narrative.

I think there are probably a couple of reasons for this. Firstly, of course, none of us like to be in the wrong. We don't like the sense that we would do the wrong or the unkind thing in any situation, and certainly not in a moment of life and death like this.

But secondly, and at least as strongly, most of us don't like the idea of being part of a crowd. We like to think of ourselves as reasonable, educated, independent-minded people. People who think carefully and can make our own mind up. People who pause to reflect and deliver a carefully balanced response. We can't imagine ourselves, *people like us*, as being overcome by collective emotion, whipped up into a fury, and sharing in the toxic attractions of the lack of nuance and love of destruction that so often crowds – so often only one stage away from riots – represent.

That sort of behaviour seems far from us, surely, a relic of a world of long ago, or of places far away.

But in reality of all the topics we will explore in these two hours, there is perhaps none more topical, and none more *of our time* than the politics of crowds. For even today, even in this country, we live in an increasingly violent age. It is only that, while, of course, the violence of crowds still occurs on our streets, it has found a new and particularly virulent outlet online.

Few people in any kind of public position today can live without the fear that the crowd will suddenly turn upon them. And, as the story of Jesus suggests, being turned on like this can lead to downfall, whatever you have or haven't done. Whether you are right or not doesn't really matter, once the crowd online decides they want your blood.

And there is perhaps no more clear parallel with this modern terror for me, than that scene of the seemingly impotent Pilate before the crowd.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

Pilate said to them 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Crucify him!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' [Cf Matt]

Even all the authority of the Roman governor cannot engage the crowd in any kind of discussion. There is no chance to explain or challenge, indeed any attempt to engage in any kind of meaningful question and answer is literally shouted down. The crowd will not be satisfied until they get what they want and the scandal is that – today, just like back then – people in power so often just let them get their way. Leaving someone, crushed, wondering ‘Why can’t I just explain?’

Once again, the Passion narrative reveals to us one of the darker currents of human life in the violence of crowds. And yet, as so often, if we are to understand how to deal with this cruel and pervasive feature of life, we need to enter into this sacred narrative to understand its dynamics more deeply.

At first the violence of the crowd seems to be a violence that is focussed against the *other*. Focussed on someone or something that is perceived as *other* or *transgressive* in some way, with a view to driving it out of society, in order to be a better *us*. If only we could get rid of that person, those people, these ideas, the our society would be such a better place.

Without Jesus – the crowd seem to think – social and religious order in Judea might be restored. Without people on the right, or the left, of politics, or people with this or that view, our own society, the crowd seems to think, would be all the stronger.

But the hot emotion that drives the anger of crowds, so often, isn’t really simply antagonism towards the other, but something that has deep roots in the self.

For in many ways those who are targeted by the crowd are those who represent that within ourselves and our own people with which we are uncomfortable. This happens, of course, most explicitly in the scapegoat ritual of the Hebrew Bible, where the sins of the collective are symbolically loaded onto a goat driven out into the wilderness. The goat – obviously – isn’t really the problem.

And whether it’s about sin, or about anxieties, or about about uncertainties, or whatever, so often the crowd is motivated not actually by the behaviour of the other, but rather by what they see in the other as a mirror of that within themselves that causes anger or shame.

And what do the crowd see in Jesus that presses their buttons? They see in him, perhaps more than anything else, a challenge to complacency, a challenge to the settled order of things, political and religious, a challenge to the structures of status and value in society, a challenge to the idolatry of

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

wealth and security. In other words – he dares to open up questions about meaning and purpose that all of us have to confront at some point or other, but that also make us feel unstable and insecure. And his questions are so insistent, so demanding, that it is easier to drive him out (or, in today's online world, simply to refuse to engage even with any questioning of our own righteousness) rather than to allow him to make his case. *Crucify him!*

But there's another reason for the violence of the crowd – more chilling when you spot it, perhaps, but perhaps more understandable. We are lured into crowds of condemnation not only to exorcise our own anxieties, but also to ensure that we are not the ones victimised ourselves. At some deep, visceral, evolutionary, primal level, we seem to feel the world is one of winners and losers, weak and strong, bullies and the bullied, aggressors and victims, and our gut instinct is to ensure that we are on the right side of this equation – whatever the cost to others.

We seek out victims, in other words, in order not to become victims ourselves. Our own weakness generates our violence.

So one thing the Passion narrative does for us is to expose this human propensity for crowd-violence for what it is. Not some kind of noble righteous anger, so often, but a brutal form of self-protection at the expense of others.

To put it crudely, what the crowd in the passion story teaches us is: just because you're angry doesn't mean you're right. The crowd got angry at Jesus.

And of course, knowing that removes something of the seductive allure for us of piling in – or at least I hope it does.

But the Passion narrative does far more than this as well, because it also reveals two ways in which we, and especially those in any kind of leadership role, can relate to the violence of others.

One response, of course, is that of Pilate. It's not that Pilate doesn't resist. Pilate does ask questions, does try to delay, does try to challenge. But it's that he *just doesn't resist hard enough*. And he justifies his ultimate failure to resist to himself by passing the buck "this is really a Jewish issue, not really my remit", or by engaging in a bit of realpolitik about the danger of riot "well we have to weigh up the risks here", or, finally, by just declaring – wrongly – this to be someone else's decision in the obscene gesture of the washing of hands and the words "see to it yourselves" – carving out for himself in that moment plausible deniability about what his decision actually was. Even though absolutely everybody knows that this is a judgment that only Pilate has the authority to make.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

When I was younger I admit I thought this was simply pathetic. How could the Roman Governor, with all these troops at his disposal, possibly abdicate his responsibility in this way.

And yet, years on, now I can see how easily, and how subtly, we part company with our integrity. How easy it is, consciously or perhaps more often sub-consciously, to just try and stand back, to not take sides, to not get involved, to turn a blind eye, to not challenge the crowd even from a position of institutional strength. And yet, by pointing out the illogicalities and the weakness, and the culpable apathy of Pilate's position, the Gospels reveal to us that *to not get involved*, to say "I'm not taking sides" in the face of evil – however we might try to justify it to ourselves – is not a moral option.

But if this is one response to the violence of the crowd the other is very different – it is that of Jesus himself.

And Jesus, in his silences and in his sufferings, responds in a way that is quite unlike that of almost any other character then or now. He refuses to participate in the world's economy of violence. He refuses not only to do violence to others out of his own anger, but also to seek to redirect the violence aimed at him at another scapegoat, another victim. Indeed, so large is his refusal to participate in the institutions of violence that he will not participate in the punitive court of the governor, even to defend his own life.

And through all this, in some mysterious way, Jesus conquers the whole world. Conquers not in the sense that he has outdone the world in performing triumphant violence, as his followers might have hoped, but that somehow by calmly refusing to be drawn into the smallness and the narrowness of reciprocal violence, or to be bullied by it, he has demonstrated that it cannot have the last word.

His victory is not a victory over others – for that would be an act of violence – but a victory over the whole economy of violence itself. A victory that is not merely symbolic or in inverted commas "heroic" (he died for what he believed in) but *real* in the glories of his resurrection and in the new and non-violent kingdom of possibilities which that resurrection inaugurates.

And in the silence of this day, I believe, we are invited to ask ourselves how we respond to violence, and how we might like to respond.

Because, for us who live in both the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of the world to come, we must attend to both Pilate and Christ in formulating our responses.

In the context of this fallen world we must not allow our own desire for self-preservation to extend to abandoning others to their fate (like Pilate), nor, in the light of the world to come, must we allow

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

our desire to imitate Christ to allow us to accept against ourselves or encourage others to accept the outrageous violence that nobody should have to bear.

Rather, in fact, we need to see that these two things work together. For *in Christ* we see that an economy of violence is not just the way things have to be, just the way of the world, just something we should accept and work within, because our vision of what is possible is so much more powerful and broad than that of Pilate. A man whose ultimate horizon and purpose seems to be *to keep the peace by whatever means necessary within a closed system of violence and winners and losers*.

For us, the glorious vision of a non-violent world impels us onwards not to act in violence, or to wash our hands of it, but rather to get our hands dirty in transforming this world, making decisions that do not operate by the logic of violence, but only by the logic of love.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

4 – Status and Humiliation

We have, I think, lived through something of a year of strikes. Whether it is teachers, junior doctors, railway staff, paramedics, academics, or nurses, a huge section of public sector workers have, at one point or another in the last twelve months, withdrawn their labour and taken to the streets. And while the explicit demand is often for more money, especially in the context of sudden cost of living increases, when you listen to the interviews, there often seems to be something else just underneath the service.

In interview after interview what seems to really drive the dissatisfaction is not so much how many percentage points of payrise, but the sense – rightly or wrongly – of a lack of respect, a lack of status. *They won't even sit down and talk with us, they won't even listen, they don't consult.* And these kind of more abstract complaints seem to be the emotional drivers of the dissatisfaction even more than questions of cash.

And this is because that question of status, that question of respect, is a central motivating factor for human beings, perhaps a more powerful one than we recognise. At one end of the spectrum wealthy people often make substantial financial sacrifices to earn social respect and recognition. There is a reason, aside from boredom, that celebrities do charity work.

At the other, we all know people who feel the need to bolster their own insecurities about status by looking down on others, or by humiliating them in front of colleagues. At it's most brutal, as psychologists working in the US Prison system have suggested, when people have no social status left to trade on at all, violence becomes the only way of asserting a status superior to those around you.

Once you have enough money to live on, it's often status rather than cash that gives you a greater feeling of security and success.

And like betrayal, like uncertainty, like violence, the Passion narrative explores this deep driver of human action, as we find nowhere more powerfully than in the deliberate humiliation of Jesus.

The flogging, the carrying of the heavy wooden cross, the exposure to the elements in nakedness, the hammering of the nails to hold the body open. These are not only supposed to inflict shocking and catastrophic amounts of physical pain, but they are supposed to strip away any shred of dignity and status the victim might have, as they remove any possible degree of agency from a human being until even the agency of breathing and life itself is taken away.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

And it is one of the great sadnesses of this last year to see that nothing of this brutality has changed. As we have witnessed in the cruel Russian invasion of Ukraine and seen the same tactics of humiliation – people mocked and tortured, sexually and physically abused, people forced to dig or stand in their own graves to be shot – as if killing people somehow wasn't enough, but they needed to be stripped of their dignity first.

But in the Passion narrative perhaps the epicentre of this revelation of the dark human temptation to humiliate and brutalise others, in ways large and small, the ability to forget their own humanity in our bolstering of our own superiority, is the soldiers' mockery of Christ. They gather the whole cohort around him – *this is going to be a good show* – then, says Matthew, *They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him saying 'Hail, king of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.*

Here, in a moment of darkly creative and brutally specific cruelty, the soldiers take up what they see as Jesus' whole identity, his whole status, everything they believe he stands for, and use it as the weapons to tease him with. The objective is to turn absolutely everything that they think he might have been proud of into an instrument with which to destroy him. *Enjoy being worshipped, King. Enjoy being hit with your reed sceptre, King. How does it feel to wear this posh robe now, King? How do you like the feel of this crown?*

The whole theatre of brutality is a calculated attempt to utterly destroy the human spirit within Jesus through attacking the one thing that they think gave him his status, to destroy Jesus' identity, before they go on to destroy Jesus' life.

And yet, this is not what happens. Far from crumpling into nothingness, the journey to Golgotha, and the experience of the Cross, shows us not the image of a human being who is, in all respects that matter, dead already, but the image of what it means to be truly human, and indeed counter-intuitively what it means to be a human being truly alive.

One of the very earliest texts we have that addresses the question of "Who Jesus is", is a hymn in the letter of Paul to the Philippians. Perhaps Paul wrote it himself, which already makes it pretty early as Paul is the earliest Christian writing we have, but many scholars think that Paul is in fact quoting the words of an even more ancient text, used by the very earliest Christians in their worship.

*Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
Did not count equality with God as something to be grasped,
But emptied himself,*

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

*Taking the form of a slave and being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death –
Even death on the cross.*

I well remember hours at theological College pouring over this text, where basically we spent all our time on the first few words, asking what it might reveal the early Church believed about Jesus' equality to the Father. But really this is to miss the point, for the whole point of this first part of the hymn is not to describe precisely Christ's ontological status, but to say that that status itself, even equality was God, is not something to be grasped, something to cling on to.

For, as the Passion narrative shows us, if we allow ourselves to grasp so tightly onto our status, or rather perhaps to allow it to grasp so tightly onto us, if we allow ourselves to allow our whole sense of meaning and purpose and identity to be tied up with some job, or family history, or class, or background in society, or education, or talent, or mission, or whatever – then it can all be so easily stripped away and nothing remains.

What is so powerful about the humiliation of Christ is that all earthly pride is indeed stripped away from Jesus, all conventional beauty, all followers, all honour, until nothing but the mere human being is left – and yet this, this, we are reminded, is the real image of God.

By tearing down the social standing, by tearing away the robes of office, by tearing away the worldly status and respect of Jesus, the soldiers think they are obliterating his dignity. When, in fact, all they are really doing is revealing what dignity, what value, what honour really is, not a shabby social construct to be bought and sold, accumulated or destroyed at the whim of those in power, but the inalienable gift of God to his human creation, created – naked – in his image.

This is the true human that Jesus is on the cross, stripped of earthly distraction, and this is the true human that passes through the deep waters of death and is raised at the resurrection, where what marks Jesus out in the risen life is not some glorious superhuman appearance, or immense size, or golden crown or anything like that, but the wounds that show *it's really him*, the vulnerable marks of his simple humanity.

And this narrative arc that we see in the Passion story, this movement from earthly honour – to its removal – to an appreciation of the value of mere humanity – to new life under that realisation, is, it seems to me, a dying and a rising that is shared in many if not all human lives.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

It is that pattern known to those of us who can recall a once upon a time, a time perhaps we prefer not to think about too much, when something went dramatically wrong, or when we failed by worldly standards, or when all the hard-earned respect of others we spent years accumulating seemed to melt away. And in those moments, those moments of our own Passion, our own humiliation, when perhaps we thought for a moment that this might be the end, we discovered irrevocably a new kind of life that begins not from the honour that the world can give us, but from the innate honour and dignity and life that is within. That starts not with “what do they think” but with the very fact of God’s gift of simply being alive.

It’s the meaning, I think, of all those teachings of Jesus, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it” “Take up your cross” “Can you drink the cup”?

Trying to keep grasping onto our life, our status, our manufactured sense of identity is a dangerous and in the end counterproductive thing to do. For as the Passion narrative shows us, if it is so often only when we allow this to be knocked from our grasp, that we begin to discover what true humanity really is and can begin to live out the whole new life that springs from that truth, now and for evermore.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

5 – Grief and Hope

As the ancient hymn *Stabat Mater* – at the Cross her Station Keeping – suggests, Good Friday is a story of two Passions, that stand for all our Passions. The Passion of Christ, the suffering of the pain that one suffers oneself. And the Passion of Mary, the suffering of the grief we experience as we look upon the sufferings of one we love. As we shall sing in a few minutes in our closing hymn:

*At the Cross her station keeping,
Stood the mournful Mother weeping,
Close to Jesus to the last:
Through her heart, his sorrow sharing,
All his bitter anguish bearing,
now at length the sword has pass'd.*

In the words of this ancient hymn, in our imagination of that moment at the Cross, we see these two passions intertwine. The Passion of Pain and the Passion of Grief circle each other and spiral onwards and forwards into the double helix of sadness that is at the grieving heart of all human love.

For as we go through life we discover what we see so powerfully forshadowed in the story of Mary at the side of the Cross, that at the heart of human experience is the experience of loss. The loss of loved ones through death or endings of relationships; the loss of joy as we look upon the illness and suffering of family, friends, or the world; the loss of opportunities and possibilities through failures and coincidences. And perhaps more fundamentally, the loss of the years that pass minute by minute, hour by hour, in a time that can never be had again.

It seems a feature of human sophistication, along with that of some other animals, that we feel these losses keenly. That we need rituals, and emotional expression, and time to process the transition as parts of our life fall away, and our soul needs the opportunity to heal and absorb our grief.

But as we contemplate Mary's own Passion, her own path of experience alongside Jesus at the foot of the Cross, we notice that as in loss relationships become memories, these memories are often not as static as they first appear. And loss never quite has the final word.

The memory of one we have loved is not a kind of psychological fossil buried deep within the heart's soil, to be dusted off, and catalogued. But rather an active agent, as the characters of our past, in the depths of our own memory become actors in our present, interrogating us, inspiring us, encouraging us, challenging us.

It's there in those clichéd expressions – “what would your father have thought of this?” Or, “we owe it to her memory”. Or in the fortunes that are raised every year to remember loved ones. And it's

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

there in much smaller, but no less moving ways every time we think of a loss and smile and feel sad and know that someone else's yesterday still shapes our today.

And that sense that those we lose, those whose sufferings we have watched, are in fact in some sense alive within us, is a foreshadowing, a footprint of a greater and more universal truth.

For Mary at the Cross provides not only a link to Jesus' past – to his annunciation, his birth, and his ministry – but also to his future, as we move in all the Gospels from a world dominated and peopled by men – the world of the Passion – into a world filled with female characters – the world of the resurrection.

For in Mary we find the intersection of personal healing and the truth of resurrection, as her natural human journey from grief, to loss, to Christ's ongoing life in her memory, coincides with his miraculous and saving journey from suffering, to death, and to the fullness of resurrection life.

There are many accounts of the resurrection recorded in the New Testament, and to explore them is the task of Easter Day, not Good Friday.

But perhaps the place to end our devotion today is with the one of them which, in its simplicity, has a depth all of its own.

At the end of Mark's Gospel (at least in the original version), Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring spices to the tomb, in which they find a young man in white robe who tells them that Jesus has been raised, he is not here. And the Gospel ends not with an appearance of Jesus himself, but with the words:

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

Mark ends by saying there is something more to this story. That what we have seen today, the Cross, the burial, the pain, and the loss. *That is not all there is.* There is another Chapter, there is another life. And yet it teeters at the very edge of our comprehension, at the very edge, even, of our belief. It is something as confusing as it is comforting, as silencing as it is inspiring.

It is for me this hope for which Mary stands, as she stands by the Cross, the figure who links the past of Jesus' life to the present of his death and to the future of his resurrection, as in Jesus' words to Mary and the beloved disciple "Woman behold thy son", "Behold thy Mother", he makes ready the community that will receive his risen presence on the first day of the week. The community which

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Good Friday Meditation and Liturgy
Friday 7 April 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Addresses by Fr Max Kramer

celebrates the fact that in God, despite our grief, nothing is truly lost, but that all our yesterdays are gathered up, treasured, held, and made alive in him.

And so, now, as we turn to face the mystery of the cross itself, we see it in the light of all that is past in the Passion and all that is to come in the Resurrection. We see in it the expression and the revelation of that which is deepest in our human life. Our betrayals, our uncertainties, our violence, our humiliations, and our hopes. That looking upon Christ this Good Friday we may know all our living and dying in him, and all his living and dying in us. For the Cross of Christ is truly the Tree of Life.